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SANDY'S SANDS

THE SHARP FROM SNAP CITY

OR,

Hoist by His Own Petard.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "MONTE JIM," "NOR-
WEST NICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

SOCIAL SAM "DOING THE GRAND."

"START the fountain once more, Johnny, and he who loves me most will build his sideboards highest! Gentlemen, in one time and two motions!"

"Hurrah for Social Sam!"

"Ain't he a daisy, though!"

"Dipped in dew—mountain dew, Johnny," laughed the flushed sport as he caught the decanter in one white, well-cared-for hand, and clicked its neck against the rim of his glass. "Never mix your drinks, gentlemen, and when you die you'll be too happy to live longer. Drink straight, live square, pay roundly, and if you don't leave a blessing behind you, be mighty sure you'll have no curses following hot-foot along your trail, Johnny!"

LIFTING THE SENSELESS DETECTIVE, SANDY PUSHED HIM THROUGH THE WINDOW, LOWERING HIM BY THE GRIP OF BOTH ARMS, THEN LETTING GO.

"Yours, Social Sam!"

"Pay yourself and hold fast to the change until the gentlemen can catch breath for another pill."

The sport, his face flushed, his eyes glowing, his white hand just a little unsteady, drew a number of golden coins from a pocket and slapped them down on the polished bar before John Keenan, proprietor of "Social Hall," the "toniest" saloon in New Dorado.

It was not often that John Keenan was found as waiter behind his own bar, of late days, and a stranger, or an ordinary customer, might have gone thirsty for an age, before having his wants supplied by that handsome, dignified, grave-faced being, who looked far more like a minister of modern days than a professional gambler and faro-dealer. And even among those who knew him best, who were most liked by him, it would have been hard to find another than Social Sam Mather who would dare to address him as "Johnny."

"Call this one on the house, Mather, and—"

"And so prolong the parting agony? No you don't, Johnny! I've got just so many ducats to get rid of before I make my final bow, and how can I do that more appropriately than by doing the grand in the hall which was—ought to have been—named after me?"

"There's another day coming, Samuel."

"And that day will find me going—going home to superintend the slaying of the fatted calf! May good digestion attend its disappearance, for I'm going to have one square meal; I'm weary of eating husks and living with—no heel-taps, gentlemen!" he laughed, tossing off the contents of his glass, a trace of malice glittering in his eyes as he saw more faces than that of John Keenan flush at his broken quotation.

His own face seemed more than ordinarily handsome, just then, despite the unhealthy flush which was born of strong drink. His dark hair fell in short, careless ring-like curls over his high, white forehead, one stray tendril partially concealing the red, triangular scar that marked his left temple; a scar that came from a wound which must have nearly cost him life.

His eyes were large, so darkly brown as to appear black. His complexion was fair, his skin smooth, his drooping mustaches soft and silken. His features were clean-cut, yet strong enough to prove him anything but a milk-sop. His figure was strong, yet graceful, but little above the average height; and he wore his clothes, of fine material and stylish cut if a trifle flashy in tone, with a careless grace that few of those near him could have shown.

Whence he had come, no one in New Dorado seemed to know. Possibly few cared, so long as he spent his gold freely; and those who liked him least could never accuse him of parsimony.

"It's your night, then, Mather, if you will have it that way," said John Keenan, quietly, dropping one of the yellow coins into his till, pushing the others back toward Social Sam. "But don't talk of leaving us for good, old fellow. New Dorado can't spare you. Eh, gentlemen?"

"Never a spare!" cried one burly fellow with a sinister face that matched his flashy jewelry right well. "Sure we'll arrest him for grand larceny, or for being Captain Kidd, if we can't keep him otherwise!"

"As I sailed, as I sailed!" chanted Social Sam. "Long life to the Captain Kidd of to-day! If he does no other good, he keeps us awake by keeping us guessing: where, when, and who is the next victim? Fill 'em up, gentlemen! Pour 'em down—to the health of Captain Kidd! May he never hold up a friend of ours, and may we all be there to see how gracefully he can climb a tree to leave this sinful world!"

"The toast is better than the subject," shortly laughed one who had not broken the silence for many minutes, though through all he had been watching Social Sam with a troubled light in his eyes. "And as the parting drink, we'll drain the dregs, gentlemen!"

"Who speaks for me, when my own tongue is sleeping?" frowned the reckless sport, dropping his glass before it touched his lips. "Who—hallo, Fenn Terry! When did you buy Social Sam for a servant?"

"Call it friend, Mather," was the hasty amendment. "All I meant was that I had to go—"

"Good-by, Fenn Terry. Tell me who's keeping you here, and I'll break his hold if I have to break his neck. Good-by, I say."

There was far more of impatient insolence than of friendship in that repeated farewell, and the face of the man who had drawn it forth turned a shade darker; but, instead of falling back, he drew closer to Social Sam, softly clasping an arm with his fingers as he added:

"Please come with me, Mather. There's a bit of business I want to talk over with you, and it's growing late. Please come."

For a brief space their eyes met. Then, with a short, reckless laugh, Mather struck the hand from his arm, turning his back toward Fenn Terry even as he sent the words back over a shoulder:

"Get thee behind me, Satan!" In other

words—*scat!* you black cat of croaking melancholy! Aroint thee, weeping Jeremiah o' the doleful visage and rheumy peepers! *Vamos!* before that vinegary mug of thine sours all Johnny's good whisk'!"

Fenn Terry flushed darker than ever, and a frown gathered his brows as the assembly laughed at the words of the half-drunken sport.

"Will you oblige me, Mr. Mather?" he persisted. "I only ask for a few words in private, and—"

"I'll give you a few words in public instead, Fenn Terry," sharply interposed Sam, squarely facing his persistent friend, a dangerous fire leaping into his dark eyes as he added: "It's a wise man who knows when to take a hint, but you'll never fall heir to Solomon's mantle. Oblige you? Yes, if you insist. Oblige you to leave, since leave you say you must, after such a fashion that your head and your heels will fall to quarreling over the question as to which got through yon door first!"

There was no sound of laughter now, for this was outgrowing a merry jest. There was an instinctive recoiling, and the two men were left to face each other, nearly every man present fully expecting to see weapons drawn and powder burned in deadly earnest.

Sam was ready, and it even seemed as though he was eager for the fray; but Fenn Terry, his face turning white, a sickly smile playing about his lips, lifted a deprecatory hand as he mumbled:

"You will have your joke, Mather. I'll see you again when the tap isn't running quite so free. Keenan," turning toward the grave-faced gambler behind the bar, "a word in your ear, please."

With a fleeting glance toward Social Sam, who had already turned his back upon Fenn Terry, as though forgetting his very existence, John Keenan passed along the bar, bending an ear to catch the words which the broker and mine-owner poured into it.

"Don't let him drink too much, Keenan. He's not himself to-night. He's been acting queerly all day. There's something wrong—I could almost swear his brain's gone wrong!"

John Keenan shrugged his broad shoulders as he bowed, with just the ghost of a smile showing in his face as he glanced toward Mather.

"What I can do, of course, Mr. Terry; but, 'twould take a better man than you or me to ride Social Sam against his will."

"I didn't mean—he's getting full, and some of the toughs may try to down him," hesitated Fenn Terry, the troubled light deepening in his eyes as they rested on the flushed face of Samuel Mather.

"Not they!" smiled Keenan, in the same guarded tones. "Sam's a little tin joss on ten wheels with the boys, as you ought to know."

"While he flashes the yellow-boys so mighty free—yes!" with a curling lip. "I'd stay to look after him, but—"

"Better not," smiled Keenan. "I'd have to shoot one or the other of you, to keep the peace—sure!"

Fenn Terry fell back, for Sam Mather lurched forward, noisily bidding Keenan furnish fresh drinks. And with the air of one who leaves because he has no desire to be drawn into a quarrel with a drunken man, the mine-broker left the saloon and passed out into the night.

After that, Social Sam had it all his own way, laughing, talking, singing, indulging in not a little "horse-play," for which he lacked no partners, for the strong liquors were affecting more than himself.

After a while a change began to come over the young man. From boasting of the glorious prospects in store for him, he fell into a curious air of reckless despondency still harder to comprehend.

"Drink deep, drink hard and long, my hearties!" he cried, emptying his own glass at a single gulp. "It's the last chance you'll get to punish good stuff at Social Sam's expense. For—keep it secret, I beg of you, lest the Old Boy break his blessed neck coming to foreclose his mortgage! For this night sees the last of Social Sam! This night hears his last social shout, and—fill 'em up some more, lads!"

"You're not thinking of leaving us, Mather?"

The young man straightened himself, gazing across the bar at John Keenan for a few seconds, then bursting into a jovial laugh as he cried:

"Not while you keep such good whisky, Johnny! Or, if I do leave, 'twill only be to come back with a fresh load of ducats, each and every one crazy to hop across your mahogany. Come back? You just bet I will! Come back with a bonanza in each fist, and a Golconda strapped to my back! Come back to buy out New Dorado—to divide it up into lots, and give the first choice to the fellow who can hold his breath longest with a demijohn snugly kissing his lips!"

"It's gospel truth, if I am lying, gentlemen. So begin practicing the quickest you know how, for the lottery goes—dead sure!"

"When do you think of setting sail in search of your bonanza, Mather?" smilingly asked John Keenan.

"By stage, to-morrow," was the prompt response. "This is my farewell benefit, gentlemen, all! Make the most of it, I beg of you!"

"Then, as I'm going on a bit of a hunt at daylight, reckon I'd just as well say good-by right now," laughed the burly fellow in flashy clothes, advancing with outstretched hand.

"Good-by goes, Dan Dillon!" nodded Mather, but giving a start as their hands separated, for a bit of paper lay in his hot palm.

CHAPTER II.

JUMPING OVER THE TRACES.

His start, his paling countenance, his general air of uneasiness if not positive alarm, could hardly have passed unnoticed but for the effusive manner of the man whom he had called Dan Dillon.

"My word is passed to Tol Farrar, you see, Sam, or I'd throw the hunt over to see you off; with a wipe in each fist o' me, too! For New Dorado can't afford to lose its brightest ornament in the trowsers line—eh, gents?"

A chorus answered, with a heartiness that ought to have flattered Samuel Mather, it seemed so genuine. And Dan Dillon added gravely:

"Think better of it, Mather. Say you're only jesting, and that you'll never desert New Dorado while New Dorado sticks to you."

Sam lifted a hand to smooth his mustaches while the burly sport was speaking, and with the same motion he brought that adroitly given scrap of paper before his keen eyes.

He saw it was a leaf torn from a memorandum-book of small size, and that on one side it bore pencil marks; not writing, but a rude representation of an animal. Only one who had seen its like before could have so readily recognized that drawing, though it was a fair representation of a kid.

Dropping his hand and slipping the paper into a pocket, Social Sam boldly faced Dillon, speaking sharply:

"New Dorado was born without me and flourished long before it ever heard of Social Sam. I reckon a deadly blight will not fall upon the town just because business calls me elsewhere for a time."

"It's only for a time, then, Mather?"

Social Sam tossed back his damp curls with a laugh that sounded forced and unnatural.

"Only for a time, unless Satan locks the door and throws away the key! Even then I'll come back, unless the key-hole is plugged up!"

"Better stay while you're here, Sammy, and save all that trouble."

"There's one sure way to keep me, Danny."

"Which is?"

"Blow my brains out, plant me deep, sit on top the mound as a monument your own sweet self," laughed Mather, buttoning his coat and pulling down his cuffs as his dark eyes ran quickly over the faces of all present.

There was something in his face, his tones, his manner, that left an unpleasant impression on more than one of those present, and in after hours all this was recalled to mind. They fancied they could understand his covert meaning, then.

Dan Dillon laughed boisterously at that grim conceit, and caught a hand between his broad palms, shaking it vigorously as he added:

"All right, Mather. A willful man will have his own way, though the heavens fall; and if you must go, good luck attend your wanderings!"

Their hands fell apart, but as they did so, Dillon gave a peculiar pressure that brought the blood hotly to the face of the young man.

None other in the room could have seen that grip, and not one in all likelihood would have guessed its meaning if they had seen it; but Social Sam knew that it called for obedience—or death!

Dan Dillon fell back a pace or two, his hard visage assuming an expression of exaggerated sorrow and regret as he heavily sighed:

"Well, our loss is some other's gain. You'll let us hear from you, of course, Mather?"

"May you all live and prosper until I forget you, gentlemen!" the young man cried, with well-counterfeited heartiness, his bow including the flashy gambler.

"We'll live in hopes of your speedy return, Sam. I'm only sorry I can't be at the stage to give you a parting tear. As it is—be good to yourself, Samuel, and don't forget those you leave behind—those who are bound to you by ties of affection which death alone can cut asunder."

Smiling broadly, in sharp contrast to his tones of mock sorrow, Dan Dillon stepped backward, waving a rather grimy hand on which sparkled several heavy rings.

In that gesture Social Sam read a signal which, up to this hour, he had never dreamed of defying or refusing recognition. And even now, while his heart was full of revolt, he nodded his head in acceptance.

"Once more, good luck, Sammy!" smiled Dillon, adding with an emphasis which probably none other in the saloon fully recognized: "Here's hoping you'll have a pleasant trip, and never a glimpse of Captain Kidd and his billy-goats by the way!"

That title produced quite a sensation among those present, and John Keenan spoke up sharply:

"Out on you for a croaker, Dan Dillon! Pity your hunt hadn't begun with the last sun, instead of the next!"

"Well, such things *have* happened, as none ought to know better than your own sweet self, boss!" laughed Dillon, flinging up an arm as though to ward off a blow or a missile.

Keenan joined in the general laugh which followed this fling, for all New Dorado knew how completely the proprietor of Social Hall had been fleeced by this same grim Captain Kidd, as the rapidly becoming famous road-agent called himself.

"I'm not weeping, Dan," retorted Keenan, with a trace of malice in his voice. "I'm willing to bet big money that every dollar Captain Kidd took from my clothes that day has come back over this bar. You've spent a heap of good money for bad whisky, Dillon."

The burly gambler grinned broadly, seeming to enjoy the jest quite as fully as any of the others.

"Wish I knew how to make money as easily and as rapidly as the worthy captain does," he declared, with a mock sigh. "It's mighty slim picking your tigers leave us poor tin-horn gamblers, Keenan."

With that he turned and left the saloon, while Social Sam, having rallied from the disagreeable shock so unexpectedly received, turned to the bar once more, tossing a yellow coin upon it, crying:

"Tis the last shot in the locker, Johnny! But, what's the odds so long's you're happy? My passage home is engaged, and where I'm going gold is of as little account as so much tissue paper!"

With a grave smile on his handsome face, John Keenan pulled out his till and passed it over the counter, saying softly:

"Dip in, Mather, and if once isn't enough, go through the same motions until you hear me call a halt."

Social Sam stared keenly into his face for a few seconds, then burst into a laugh, as he ejaculated:

"If I don't believe he actually means it all!"

"I never say what I don't mean, pardner. Help yourself. You'd do the same if I came to you broken."

"I'm glad you think so, Johnny," pushing the drawer back without availing himself of the frank offer. "Because it's better to be thought a fool than a knave. All the same—Thanks, awfully!"

"Then you were simply jesting?" hesitated the gambler.

"Of course I was! Why, man, inside of—Well, bragging is played out for one night, and I'll let you find out the whole truth in natural course. Which reminds me—Walk up, gentlemen, and help yourselves. It's flatly against nature for glasses and decanters to lie idle while money is lying on the bar!"

Without an exception those inside the saloon pressed alongside the bar, where Social Sam had already filled his glass to the brim.

He fell back as though to give them more room, and crying aloud:

"Here's to our next meeting, gentlemen! May we all be there, be it aloft or alow—among the stars, or in the midst of a sulphur bath!"

He tossed off the liquor, dropped the glass to the floor, and strode swiftly out of the saloon without another word, vanishing from their sight before hardly one of them all could divine his purpose.

Once outside the saloon, Mather turned to the right, and was striding swiftly up the street, casting keen glances round about him, when a dark figure came leaping across the street to join him.

"Just in time to save your bacon, Sammy!" grimly muttered Dillon, his right hand lifting enough to call the attention of the young sport to the heavy revolver in his fingers. "Two minutes longer, and—"

"What do you mean by that?" growled Mather, savagely eying the burly gambler, but checking his hand in its instinctive journey to the weapon which he, in common with all other citizens of the mining-town, habitually carried on his person.

"Business, chuck-up," was the stern retort. "I gave you the call. I gave you the grip. I made the signal which you are bound by a solemn oath to obey, promptly and at once."

"Once—not now!" doggedly muttered Mather, freeing his arm by a sudden jerk, though still facing the gambler in the gloom without any sign of flinching or intention of flight. "I've shaken the outfit. I gave warning that I'd do no more work for the gang."

"But what if your resignation be not accepted?"

"Who dare hold me when I want to go?"

"Suppose Captain Kidd should see fit to do so?"

"Captain Kidd be—blessed! I was drunk, and a fool besides, when I first went into the gang."

"You're mighty nigh drunk now you're trying to get out of it," was the retort. "I'll let the fool part go; it's not always best to speak the whole truth. I thought you worse than a fool, a bit ago, while I held the watch on you with one hand and a silver bead with the other. It

makes me shiver, even yet! Two little minutes more, and I'd have thrown you cold, Sammy!"

"To pull hemp a minute later!"

"That wasn't in my lines. I had a sworn duty to perform, and could see not an inch beyond that. If you're wise, Sam Mather, you'll take much the same view of it. You are under the same sacred oath!"

"Look ye, Dillon," returned Mather, coldly, his eyes sparkling through the gloom. "I've shook the gang, and thrown it all up, for good. I'm hewing out a new line— I'm going to live a new life from this night on, and all the gang can't hinder me—unless they take my life!"

"I've no right to say you shall or shall not," coldly uttered Dan Dillon, in reply. "There's only one pair of lips that can break your solemn oaths; and they belong to neither you nor me. Wait until you meet the boss, then talk *him* into letting you off."

"If I hadn't been a fool, I'd have jumped town without even a word of warning," growled Mather, his head drooping a bit. "What does the call mean, anyway?"

"I can't tell you that, either. All I know is that I was sent for you, and that I'll take you—dead, if I can't take you living!"

"Take me where?" persisted Mather, his eyes once more lifting to the face of the man who stood in the new line he had marked out for his erring feet to follow.

"To the old shack, of course. Didn't you see the secret sign?"

"I only saw the kid. Would you have me ask Keenan for an extra light to scan, the paper by?"

"The sign is there, all the same, and that sign reads 'old shack.'"

"Who sent it to me?"

"The boss, of course."

"But who is he? What's his real name?"

"Captain Kidd is plenty good enough for me, so long as obeying his orders fills my kicks with yellow-boys," laughed Dillon lightly.

"It isn't good enough for me, any longer," said Mather, turning away.

"I've nothing to say to that. All I need to know now is—are you going peaceably with me, or not?"

"I'm going, but not with you, nor to Captain Kidd," was the firm response, as Social Sam strode away from the spot.

"Then I'll have to take you!" growled Dillon, leaping after.

One of his hands dropped on Social Sam's shoulder, the other still gripping a revolver, but, before he could do more, Mather swung around and struck out with a hard-clinched fist.

CHAPTER III.

A PRESSING INVITATION.

MR. DILLON could hardly have anticipated actual resistance to the authority represented by his worshipful self, else he might have been found better prepared for that fierce assault.

The same oaths bound them, and rough, tough, reckless fellow as he had so often proved himself, he would never dare rebel against that authority unless his life actually depended on his so doing. And what he would not dare, he never believed another would; and though he gripped his revolver, the hammer was down and he displayed the weapon much as a policeman might his locust.

With a growl that might have been an oath, Sam whirled about, his right fist shooting out, backed by the whole weight of his muscular body. His aim was true as his will was fierce, and the bunch of knuckles struck Dan Dillon squarely on one jaw, turning him almost end for end, his head striking the hard ground with an ugly thump.

His shiny hat went one way, his pistol another, but Dillon himself stopped right there. Not a cry nor a curse escaped his lips. He fell in an awkward heap, a convulsive shiver running over him, much as a lump of jelly shivers when shaken.

"Say you will," growled Mather, crouching a bit, and looking as eager as ready to follow up his swift blow with another attack in case the burly gambler was not fairly satisfied. "You can't take one side of me, even though you had Captain Kidd and his whole brood of billy-goats at your back, Dan Dillon!"

The sound of his own voice startled him, and Sam Mather crouched lower, hand on pistol, as he swept his dark eyes swiftly around. It would have fared illy with any comer, just then, judging from his looks and actions; but there were none such.

If his secession had been noticed—as of course it must ere this—no one from Social Hall had attempted to follow after him, and no other person chanced to be near just at that instant.

"I'd ought to slug him for keeps!" muttered Mather, when satisfied on this point, creeping closer to his fallen adversary, pausing when an outstretched hand could rest on his person. "I'd ought—ugh!" with a shiver of mingled rage and disgust as he leaped to his feet and strode rapidly away from the spot. "Not that—so soon!"

Involuntarily his thoughts went back to the words he had spoken to Dan Dillon when refusing to obey that grim summons. He had

marked out a new line: he was going to follow a new life from that hour.

Yet only a few minutes later, almost before the breath that shaped those words on his lips had dried, the tempter had him in his grip: his fingers were itching for the gold which he knew the gambler carried about with him!

"It was born with me, I reckon!" was the frowning comment as he beat a hasty retreat, only drawing a long and free breath when fairly out of sight of the spot where Daniel Dillon lay like one dead. "It'll always haunt me—leaving that hoodle! And Dan's not the lad to give me credit for it either. He'll think I was too badly frightened to think of anything but running away in the dark. For little—"

He stopped, turned partly around as though to retrace his steps, but then pressed on again, forcing a low laugh as he did so.

"It's your old good luck, Danny! But if you cross me again—I'm betting long odds you don't get off so cheaply. That is, if I haven't brken your neck and cheated the hangman out of a sure job!"

There was something in this last reflection that seemed to lend the sport comfort, for he smothered a grim chuckle as he pressed on at a rapid pace, choosing a course that kept him from meeting with man or woman, and quickly carried him to the outer edge of the busy little mining-town.

He halted in the deeper shadow cast by a broken-topped tree, taking off his hat and wiping his face, tossing back the damp curls and bending his head backward as though to catch the faint, cool breeze more fully.

His blood was heated, quite as much by ugly passions as by the strong liquor he had been drinking so freely; for his was one of the few heads that can withstand what would make a dozen ordinary men blind drunk.

"What does that infernal call mean, anyway?" he mused, rallying his wits and striving to bring them all to bear on the point that troubled him most of all, just then. "Is it just the old work, or has he struck the new scent? If he has—"

He broke off abruptly, clasping his fingers together as his hands rose to his throbbing temples, pressing them almost fiercely as he strove to recall all that had escaped his lips at Social Hall.

He knew that his glib tongue had been wagging freely, and he knew, too, that more than once he had nipped the unruly member sharply between his teeth to keep it from saying too much. But had he always been in time? Had he let anything drop that could betray the real cause of his deserting the evil gang with which he had been associating?

"Did I? That's the rub! If I did, Dillon's just brash enough to take it on himself to play the boss, trusting to luck to carry him safely through the breakers when Captain Kidd comes to know of it. If not—bah!" with a low, bitter laugh as he pictured to himself that swift blow before which the burly gambler had turned up his heels.

"What matter, now? Dan would wear his tongue to the roots but what he'd bring enough against me to call for utter squelching! This burg's no place for a man of my size and complexion. But, how to leave it?"

He thought of the stage, but only in passing, for he knew that were he to attempt to carry out his original intention of leaving New Dorado by that means, he would be stopped, dead or alive, after what had that night occurred.

He gave a start and turned his head over one shoulder as the not very distant neigh of a horse came to his ears. His eyes fell upon a goodly sized building in that direction, and as he recognized it, a low, irritable laugh parted his lips.

"That's one way, sure enough; but—it cracks that new line all to thunder! And I really meant it, too! If I could once get the hoodle in my grip, it would be so easy to live squarely!"

That was the rub! No man knew better than he in what peril he stood after his blunt defiance of the grim authority to which he had sworn blind allegiance. He knew that riches awaited his claiming, if he could only escape from that dark shadow. But to escape, he must commit yet another crime.

"Needs must where the devil drives!" he muttered, doggedly, pressing forward in the direction from whence that neigh had come. "Fenn Terry is mighty proud of his black, but I don't reckon he'd kick so mighty hard if he knew that it's neck or nothing with his old pard!"

Now that his mind was fairly made up, Sam hesitated no longer, only using natural precautions in approaching the stable in which Fenn Terry kept his favorite riding-horse. Friend and partner though he called him, Mather knew that the mine-broker would hardly stop to ask how much he needed such a mount before firing, should he have his suspicions awakened.

Mather set about his work with all the ease and coolness of a practiced horse-thief, aided not a little in this by his perfect familiarity with the premises on which he now stood. He had been inside the stable so often that he did not need a light to show him where to go, or how to find what he most needed just then.

A low whinny greeted him as he opened the little side-door, but at a word from his familiar lips, the black stallion stood still, perfectly at ease. And when Mather groped his way to the feed-bin, dropping a handful of oats into the manger, the noble creature playfully nibbled at his hand before accepting the food.

"You'd bite instead of kissing, old fellow, if you only knew how low down I'm playing it on a friend," mumbled Mather, as he quickly put saddle and bridle in place, patting that arching neck before leading the horse from its roomy stall. "I wouldn't mind so much if it was an enemy, or even a stranger, but a pard like Terry!"

Something like a sigh parted his lips at that, but now that he was fairly entered upon the task, Mather did not hesitate.

He led the horse to the front door, holding it with a firm grip by the reins, close to its mouth, as he unfastened the double doors and silently pushed one of them open far enough to permit him to peer forth.

All was still about the premises, and though he suspiciously scanned every rod of ground within range of his eyes, he could see nothing to give him uneasiness.

"I'll manage to make it up to both of you, old fellow," he whispered, as he pushed the door wider, and then led the horse outside. "Let me get beyond that black-bearded devil's range, and I'll—"

"Steady!" came a clear, hard voice, as a dark figure abruptly rose from behind a little clump of shrubbery, not half a dozen yards away. "I've got you lined, and out goes your light at the first crooked move!"

"Hold! Terry, it's only me!" huskily cried Mather, shrinking a bit from that menacing weapon, flinging up his free hand in token of submission.

"And only me is only a horse-thief, eh? Up hands, and empty!"

"But, Terry, I didn't—"

The loop of a strong rope fell about his shoulders, and a vigorous jerk sent him heavily to the ground. A muscular form pounced upon him, and as the armed man came rushing forward to help, the coarse tones of Dan Dillon smote upon his ears.

"Tit for tat, Sammy! You downed me, and I down you! Only—you're down to stay, while I got up in plenty time to nab you red-handed. Is this the new life you meant to lead, Mather?"

"You grinning devil!" panted Sam, vainly striving to break away from their united grip.

"Just one of his imps, Sammy."

The rope was twisted about his arms, and then, with one at each side, Mather was lifted to his feet and taken back to where the moonlight was less likely to betray their presence.

The black horse had backed into the stable at the first alarm, and was doubtless safely inside its stall once more.

"Now, Sam Mather," said Dillon, his voice hard and business-like as he gently tapped the prisoner on a cheek with the cold muzzle of a revolver by way of emphasis to his words. "Which would you rather do? Obey Captain Kidd, as you are solemnly sworn, or be shown up to all the town as that same road-agent chief?"

"Do your worst, curse ye!" viciously grated Mather, once more making a desperate effort to break away, bound though his arms were. "I'll never know rest until I've evened up with you both!"

"We might run you in as a simple horse-thief, but then we'd only have the satisfaction of seeing you pull hemp; there'd be no money in it. But, as Captain Kidd—there's the reward, you understand!"

"Bah! take me for a fool?"

"You think it wouldn't work?" chuckled Dillon, putting up his revolver to use his hand to better advantage. "Steady him, pard, and I'll give the lad another wrinkle or two—just for luck!"

He took a black mask, with long and jetty beard attached, from his bosom, and deftly fastened them over the face of their captive, drawing back a bit to laugh anew at the startling alteration thus effected in his appearance.

A score of keen-eyed fellows will be ready to take oath you're the Simon Pure Captain Kidd, Sammy, if you force us to take you to town."

"Caught in the act of lifting a fresh mount, too!" said the other. "They'd string him up, too mighty quick!"

"Unless he accepts our invitation to pay the boss a visit. Which is it to be, Sammy?" persisted Dan Dillon.

There was a brief silence, during which Samuel Mather was rapidly weighing his chances. But then he sullenly yielded, muttering:

"I'll go to the captain, at the old shack, of course."

CHAPTER IV.

"OUT GOES YOUR LIGHT."

"THE burly gambler laughed softly as he said: "I reckon you'd think better of it, Samuel, when you'd taken time to weigh the matter. It's mighty bad medicine to decline a cordial in-

itation such as the boss usually sends out to his billy-goats."

"Shall we take the horse along, pard?"

"Not if I know it!" was the quick reply. "No sense in running the risk of pulling hemp for pulling horse-flesh."

"All right; you're running the job. I only thought we'd have less trouble in getting him over the ground that way."

"If he gives too much trouble— But you'll never be so brash, eh, Sammy?" chuckled Dillon, as his grip tightened on an arm, and the prisoner was forced away from the stable toward the not very distant foot-hills.

"Did the boss say you were to talk me to death?"

"Want time and quiet in which to conjure up a good defense, eh?" laughed the burly gambler. "All right; hope you'll make the rattle, pard; but don't forget that I've got to make a fair report if the old man asks me for one."

"I ask no favors from either of you."

"Lucky. You'll run less risk of being disappointed, then."

Samuel Mather made no response, and Dillon seemed content to rest with the last word.

Until safely away from the Terry place, and fairly beyond the few outlying cabins of New Dorado, the two men kept firm hold of Mather, one walking on each side, ready to act as necessity should justify. But they met no person by the way, and Social Sam made no further attempt to break either his bonds or their grasp, while, from the very first, he had shown no desire to call help by shouting aloud for it.

When fairly clear of town, Dillon left his partner to keep a hand on Mather, falling behind with drawn revolver ready for use in case anything should turn up to endanger his oath to take the sport to his captain.

The deserted cabin at which the rendezvous was given, stood among the frowning hills far away from New Dorado, but, as the night was still young when the capture was effected, the guards had ample time in which to cover the ground lying between. And the rough way was all too short for Sam Mather.

He was trying to form a defense which might stand a chance of being accepted as valid by the grim knave whom he knew only as Captain Kidd, road-agent and chief of the gang locally known as the "Billy-goats." But his success was poor, and his heart seemed to sink into his very boots when a sharp, stern challenge rung out through the night:

"Halt! who comes there?"

"Two goats and a stray kid!" promptly replied Dillon, striking a match and holding it so that the flame clearly lighted up his face.

"Have you any idea how long you've kept me waiting, my fine fellow?" almost viciously demanded the unseen person.

"I only know that I haven't wasted a single moment of my own free will," was the prompt response. "We had to fetch him, boss."

"So much the worse for him. Bring him along."

The chief led the way into the dilapidated-looking cabin, shutting the door behind his fellows and then striking a light by which he might scan each face and figure before going further.

Little could be told of his own face and figure, however, though all other eyes were turned upon him.

A slouched hat hid his upper face, and a long beard, jetty black and coarse as though manufactured out of a horse's tail, concealed the rest, mingling as it did with a wig made of the same coarse material.

An army overcoat, dyed black, shrouded his figure so that one could only guess vaguely at its outlines.

"You say you had to fetch him, Dillon?" he asked, after keenly scanning the pale, hard-set visage of the bound man. "Did you give him the signal?"

"All of them, boss. I gave him the paper, and he looked at it. I gave him the grip, and he returned it. I waited outside for him, and told him in so many words that you wanted him here."

"Yet you had to bring him, by force?"

"And mighty lucky to get him that way, too!" with a half-sheepish laugh as a hand rose to gingerly feel of his swollen jaw. "He said he wouldn't come; that he'd jump the gang for good and all. I said I'd take him, dead or alive, when he whirled and gave me a mule-kick on the jaw that laid me out cold for a minute or two."

"Pity I hadn't hit lower, and broken your bull neck!" sulkily muttered Sam.

"Wait your turn, my man," sharply enjoined Captain Kidd, flashing a vivid glance toward the prisoner. "Where did you pick him up?"

"At Fenn Terry's stable, just leading the black out, ready for the road. He said he was going to jump the town, you understand."

"That will do. You've done well, Dillon and Farrar. I'll make it up to you in the end. Just now—go out and watch. You'll find some of the rest of the Goats on guard."

Bowing, the two fellows backed out of the cabin, and Captain Kidd dropped the heavy oaken bar across the door as it swung to behind

their forms. Then he turned toward Samuel Mather, who was standing with downcast eyes, striving to seem at ease, but making a very poor job of it, despite the rare nerve with which he was credited.

"You heard the report just made, Mather; what have you to say in regard to it?"

"Would you believe me if I were to swear it a lie from start to finish, captain?"

Their eyes met for a brief space; then the masked chief shook his head in grim dissent.

"Not with that face and those eyes backing up your words, Social Sam. Do you take such an oath, though?"

"What's the use, since you've already judged me guilty?"

"Not much, that's a fact," with a short, hard laugh. "Why wouldn't you come at my call, Mather?"

"Because I considered I no longer belonged to the gang. I sent you word that I'd draw out, giving up my share in the last haul by way of forfeit. Wasn't that enough?"

"It might be, were this an ordinary business organization; but it is not, and none should know that better than you, Sam Mather. You went into it with your eyes open. You took the sacred oaths by which we all are bound. You knew that there was no drawing out, unless by a unanimous vote of the family. Why didn't you ask for that vote if you were tired of working in our harness?"

Mather hung his head, mumbling something too low and indistinct for those keen ears to fully catch. All of the hardihood which he had shown when facing Dan Dillon, had vanished, now that he stood in the presence of that masked chief.

"Shall I answer for you?" smiled the outlaw.

"Because you feared the questions which would be asked before that vote could be taken. Because you dreaded to have the whole truth revealed against your will; to have it made known to all you were plotting to cheat them out of their just dues."

"That's a lie, whoever told you, captain!" flashed Mather, desperately, though his face showed whiter than ever.

"Shall I give you the proof?" sneered Captain Kidd, his manner changing abruptly. "Shall I tell you all I know of Samuel Mather, his hopes, his plans, his family? Shall I tell you that he wanted to jump the band unawares, because he feared they would lay claim to a share of the mighty fortune that awaits his claiming back East?"

The prisoner stood staring at his captor, with widely-opened eyes and drooping jaw, the very picture of amazement. And when Captain Kidd paused with that sneering question, Mather gasped:

"How did you—I thought I had the only paper in town!"

"Then you admit it all, Mather?"

Sam started, flushing hotly as he saw how completely he had betrayed himself; but, Captain Kidd laughed contemptuously.

"Bah, you fool! I knew the whole story, long before you picked up that paper and read the advertisement it contained—the same advertisement that has appeared in scores of other papers, to my certain knowledge, and for many months past. You might have known as much, too, if you had paid more attention to literature than to liquor."

"There isn't—it only wanted word of Samuel Mather, who once lived in—"

"And you thought no one else could read between the lines?" contemptuously laughed Captain Kidd, his eyes glittering vividly beneath the rim of his slouched hat. "You thought none other had ever heard of the Mather family—of old Theodore Mather; of runaway Sam Mather; of charming May Mather, his fairy-like sister?"

"I begin to believe you really are the devil men call you."

"Of course I am," with a mocking bow.

"And you are still one of my imps, Samuel; don't forget that, I beg of you."

"What do you want of me, anyhow? You can't prove that I'm the man called for in that advertisement, if I see fit to deny it."

"I'm not so mighty sure I want to prove you the co-heir to charming May Mather," slowly said the outlaw, running his fingers through his coarse beard, keenly watching his captive the while. "Maybe I'll rest content with winning her share of the fortune."

Sam gave a start at those words, and there was a curious catch in his voice as he demanded:

"What do you mean by that, captain?"

An abrupt change came over the chief at that question. His form drew erect, his slouched hat was pushed back to leave his blazing eyes full play, and as his right hand quivered close to the face of his helpless captive, he spoke in stern, merciless tones:

"I mean that I am your master, Samuel Mather. I mean that your life or your death depend on how you conduct yourself during the next few minutes. I mean that you shall turn over all your right and title in the fortune left behind him by Theodore Mather, or—die!"

Without giving the pale-faced prisoner time to reply, Captain Kidd turned to the door,

turning back the oaken bar and swinging the still strong barrier wide open.

He uttered a low, but clear whistle, and almost immediately armed figures began to file into the room, dividing and passing to either side until the two men were surrounded by armed and masked members of the road-agent band.

Still hoping against hope, Samuel Mather gazed at each man in turn, but without finding aught to encourage him.

He could recognize Dan Dillon and Tol Farrar, by their clothes, but that was all. Not one of the others could he place, though he knew only too well that they might one and all have been drinking with him that very evening in Social Hall.

In grim silence Captain Kidd passed around the circle, grasping each man's hand in turn, no doubt to make sure that no spy was hidden behind those sable masks. Then, as if satisfied that all were qualified to be present and to vote for life or death, he drew back to the center of the room, speaking clearly, coldly:

"Brothers: Each one of you has taken the oaths which alone bind us together. Each one of you is qualified to judge a recreant brother. Now—when a brother makes a strike and keeps it secret, in order to defraud his brethren, what fate should be his?"

"Death!"

"You have spoken, brethren. The rest is mine," bowed Captain Kidd, and as he waved his hand, the sable crew filed out of the cabin.

"You have just five minutes in which to decide, Samuel Mather," coldly uttered the chief, taking out his watch and opening it.

"And if I refuse to yield?" slowly asked Mather.

"Out goes your light!"

CHAPTER V.

AJAX TIPSYTOE AND HIS PASSENGERS.

"PULL up, Topsy—breakers ahead!"

"Waal, I be jo-hammered! Whoa-ap!"

Ajax Topsytoe kicked the brake over and flung his weight upon the curved foot-rest, at the same time leaning back on the box as he strained the ribbons with a force that brought his four-horse team up all-standing.

A veteran of the "Overland," in the days when a stage-driver was "monarch of all he surveyed," barring an occasional road-agent or Indian buck with the usual backing, Topsytoe was quick to take a hint, and though all looked peaceable enough ahead of them, he was running no extra risks for the same old wages.

True, matters were far different from what they used to be, in these degenerate days, yet road-agents, with the customary trimmings, were not altogether unheard of, and it really did look like a trap of some sort ahead of them.

It was the stage running from Snap City across the foot-hills to New Dorado, and up to the present moment everything had gone along without a hitch or chafing. Topsytoe was ahead of schedule time, and as his destination grew so distant, he good-naturedly permitted his team to take it easy, even though they were on crossing a fairly good bit of ground.

Topsytoe did not have a very heavy load that day: only four passengers inside, and one more on the box-seat with himself; but it was an unusually precious cargo for all that. So he confidentially declared to his present companion, emphasizing his opinion by sending a wink over his shoulder and downward, as though he meant it to perforate the dusty roof of the stage. And so that companion, Mr. Alexander Sands, better known to fame, perhaps, as "Sandy Sands," seemed willing enough to admit.

A white hand spread out over his heart, his lips closed and parted with an audible sound that sent the spirited horses forward a little more rapidly. Doubtless they took it for an expression of impatience, but Topsytoe knew better.

"Mighty right you air, pardner," he nodded, giving a faint sigh to himself as he began to reflect over the glorious past, and contrast it with his inglorious present.

His usually glib tongue fell into silence, and Sandy Sands seemed willing enough to accept the situation, for he said not another word until he caught sight of the obstruction lying across the trail, which drew from his lips that hasty warning in guarded tones.

Even as Ajax Topsytoe reined in his team, Sandy Sands swiftly added in tones barely loud enough for the driver to catch his meaning:

"If it's really agents, hold up and play easy unless they offer insult or harm to the young lady. Then—business, Topsy! And if you fail, I'll look you up later!"

"Business goes, pardner, ef it takes every wheel I've got!" said the veteran driver, in the same hurried but cautious tones.

"What's the matter, driver?" came an anxious voice from below, and a round, rosy face was thrust through the window on the off side, two round eyes of china-blue looking agitatedly up at the wrinkled visage of the ribbon knight. "Don't say it's road-agents! Don't say it's that dreadful Captain Kidd, or—I'll die—I'll just die if you do!"

"Cap'n Kidd be—jo-hammered, mum!" sniffed Topsytoe, who had expected to catch a glimpse of quite another style of face. "They ain't nothin' wuss the matter then a tree drapped 'cross the trail."

So indeed it appeared, for no armed shapes rose up behind that leafy barricade; no harsh voice rung out in challenge; no leveled tubes threatened to send lead where gold or printed paper were refused.

"Drive up closer, Topsy," muttered Sandy Sands, never taking his hands out of the pockets into which they had slid at first glimpse of possible danger. "If we have to make a break, we want all hands aboard for the jump-off."

Even the lead span seemed suspicious of danger, for they pranced a bit and sniffed a good deal before Topsytoe could bring them near enough the barrier to see that no evil shapes lay in ambush behind it.

"Jest a blow-down, I reckon, pardner," he said, with a long breath of relief. "But, ef I didn't reckon 'twas Cap'n Kidd an' his Billy-goats, may I be eternally—jo-hammered!"

Sandy Sands sprang lightly to the ground and crossed the fallen tree at a bound, quickly satisfying himself that the barricade had indeed been formed by nature, not man.

While he was thus engaged, the "inside passengers" availed themselves of this chance to both satisfy their curiosity and to stretch their legs for a few minutes. Even Mrs. King, the owner of that round face and light blue eyes, alighted, the springs of the old stage giving a creak that seemed a groan of great relief; for Mrs. King was "fair, fat and fifty."

Two men alighted, to join Topsytoe and Sands in their efforts to clear the trail. One was a burly fellow a little past middle age, looking like a miner who had met with a fair share of prosperity. The other seemed less familiar with mountain life, and might have been a prosperous banker, merchant, speculator or what-not, come from his Eastern home to personally inspect the properties through which he made his living.

There was still another "inside," though she was now outside, watching the men at work over the fallen tree. And, after one glimpse of her lovely face, the secret of Topsytoe's wink and Sandy Sands's smack was fairly out; this fair young lady was the one for whom the veteran and the dashing sport from Snap City were willing and ready to risk their lives in a breakneck dash over fallen trees with a fringe of grim road-agents!

The tree was not a large one, though it completely blocked the narrow trail. A few strokes with the ax habitually carried on the coach severed the few unbroken roots, then those four pair of strong arms quickly swung the barrier aside and left a clear passage.

"All aboard, ladies an' gents!" cheerily cried Topsytoe. "No bones busted, an' still ahead o' schedule time!"

"Oh, dear!" sighed the younger lady, with a wistful glance toward the box seat into which Topsytoe was nimbly climbing. "Must we go back into that hot, stuffy den again?"

"Unless—will you kindly change places with me?" quickly asked the man from Snap City, lifting his hat and smiling as he bowed. "I am tired of riding outside, but you might find it pleasant, for a change. Shall I assist you?"

"But—wouldn't it be—the driver might object," murmured the young lady, at the same time sending a glance upward that caused Topsytoe to catch his breath and flush red as any boiled beet.

"He'll be simply delighted—how could he help it? Ready, Topsy. Now, if you please, ma'am."

And, before the young lady could say aught more, she was perched on the box-seat, with Ajax tangling his reins all up in his embarrassment.

But this did not last long. The lady showed such natural delight at her change of position, and nestled so confidently up to him, yet without in the least interfering with his duties, that the old man was quickly put at his ease.

Never before had Topsytoe realized what a beautiful route he had been driving over day by day for a couple of years past, and he saw more rare and curious objects during those fleeting minutes, as pointed out by the fair passenger, than he could have believed that entire mountain range contained, else.

Then, as the journey continued, and Ajax fairly found his tongue, the young lady gracefully shifted the subject of conversation, and began asking questions concerning New Dorado, her present destination.

It did not take Topsytoe long to rattle off a history of the mining-town, with whose birth, rise and present condition he was thoroughly familiar, having been at the christening, so to speak.

The young lady mildly expressed her wonder and delight, gazing up into that weather-beaten visage with a pleasing expression of awe in her lustrous eyes, until Ajax, swelled up as grandly as his namesake of old in the face of heaven's anger.

"Yes indeedy, ma'am," he nodded, briskly. "What I don't know 'bout Dorado, an' Snap

City, an' Bunco-town, an' all the rest of 'em, ain't anything like wu'th mentionin'. An' as fer them what's in 'em, why—"

"Would you mind telling me about some of them?" softly interposed his fair companion. "It is so wild, so new, so romantic! It really makes me shiver with—well, *delight*, if I must say it! You will not think me too—too awfully bold, Mr. Topsy?"

"Toe, ma'am; Topsytoe," hastily corrected the driver, his wrinkled visage filled with curiously mingling resignation and disgust. "With Ajax fer a door-knob, so to speak. Give me by the ole folks. An' more times then a-plenty, ma'am, I've split the brain-pan o' me wonderin' why in—jo-hammer! they didn't hev a Christian name, even ef they hed to steal it? An' the boys callin' me Topsy Jax, more o'fen then not!"

"It is a good name, as long as it is worthily borne; and I know their son has never disgraced the name those parents bestowed upon him," said the young lady. "But—you know many people, you say? Did you ever hear of one called Amos Duprez, in Snap City?"

Topsytoe wrinkled his brows, then reluctantly shook his head.

"Never, ma'am. Reckon he must 'a' come here lately?"

"Tell me about some of the others, then, please?"

"From Snap City? Waal, I needn't go no fuder then right back an' under us both, ma'am! Thar's Sandy Sands—the gent as give you his place so piert, ye understand? Waal, he's white as they make 'em, he is! F'rinstance: last winter he was settin' right whar you be now, ma'am, an' it was snowin' pritty free. An' a flake drapped onto the nose o' Sandy, ma'am, jest afore I turned to ax him a word or two. An' ef I didn't up to wipe it off, ma'am, thinkin' all the time it was a bit o' smut! I jest *did*! He's *that* white, ma'am!"

The young lady said nothing with her lips, but her eyes were eloquent enough to satisfy even Topsytoe, and feeling that he had struck a paying vein, he went on to narrate other more or less veracious facts concerning Sandy Sands. But—just how, Topsytoe could never tell—before long she had switched him off and led him to talk about people and things at New Dorado.

He told her of Fenn Terry, waxing almost as enthusiastic about him as about Sandy Sands. He told of the many mines in which the broker held an interest; of his fine mansion; of his wonderful horse; of his enterprise to which New Dorado owed so much; and added in a whisper:

"The fat woman back yen' is his step-mother, ef ye'd believe it!"

"She is a nice, motherly old lady, and has been very kind to me since I first met her, in Snap City. But—did you ever hear of a gentleman by the name of Mather—Samuel Mather?"

There was a curious tremor in her musical voice as she asked this question, and Topsytoe shot a side glance into her face, as hastily averting his eyes. For the lady was gazing eagerly into his face, her own paling as with strong emotion.

"I reckon you mean Social Sam, ma'am," hesitated the driver, finding his leaders unusually troublesome, just then, keeping him too busy to risk another glance that way. "Yes, I've hearn tell o' the gent."

"He is well? He is living at New Dorado?"

"Frind o' yours, ma'am?" ventured Ajax, feeling his way.

"Yes. A friend—of my family," faltered his fair companion, plainly taking alarm at this abrupt change in the talkative driver. "I came here to find him, and—tell me true, dear sir! He is not—he is alive and well?"

But before Ajax Topsytoe could answer that tremulous question, a human figure suddenly leaped out before the horses, flinging up his hands and uttering a sharp cry.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SHARP FROM SNAP CITY.

"HOLD up, Topsy Jax! you're wanted!" Mechanically the driver kicked over the brake and leaned back on the reins, jumping to the conclusion, natural enough under the circumstances, that he was halted by road-agents.

His first thought was of his lady passenger, and possible peril to her blinded him for the moment to what he would have been quick enough to see at any other time: that the hands of the man who barred the way were empty, though a rifle was slung across his shoulders.

Swift as thought Sandy Sands flung open the door and sprang out by the roadside the instant that harsh challenge rung forth. A revolver was in each hand, and their muzzles were turned toward the fellow, even before the sport fairly touched the earth.

"Run through—on the jump, Topsy!" he cried, sharply. "I'll look out for these—Hollo!"

The stranger had vanished from sight behind a convenient boulder, but his voice came sharp and clear:

"Hold on, hot-heads! I'm a friend, and only—"

"Advance, friend, and give the countersign!" cried Sandy Sands, in turn making a vigorous leap that carried him half-way to the covert behind which the fellow had dropped.

"I'm Tol Farrar—Topsytoe knows me!"

"But he never knowed ye was sech a du-fo-hammered fool as to buck ag'inst a hull army like this!" growled Ajax, in disgust at having been so thoroughly frightened. "What do you mean, anyhow?"

"Tell that critter to put up his guns and—don't shoot, pard!" ending with a quaver of fear as he saw Sandy Sands come noiselessly to the other side of the bowlder, sending the grim muzzle of a cocked revolver in advance. "I'm white—white an' honest!"

"I reckon it's all right, pard," nodded Tipsy-toe, as the Sharp from Snap City cast a quick glance that way. "It's Tol Farrar. He's a bigger fool than he looks—an' that's needless!"

"What did you halt the stage for?" demanded Sandy Sands, keenly sweeping his gaze around them, but holding the cowering fellow under the muzzle of his pistol.

"They's a man up yender—blew his brains out—wanted to send him back to town by the hearse," hastily explained Tol Farrar, not venturing to rise from his cramped position, even yet.

"What man? Why did you blow his brains out?"

"Never—did it him own self!"

"A suicide, eh?" muttered Sands, with a fleeting glance toward the box-seat, where he saw a pale, frightened face just beyond the driver's stooping shoulders. "Who was it?"

"A fellow they call Social Sam. I believe his real name is Sam Mather," began Farrar, only to start and stare wonderingly toward the girlish figure on the stage, from whose lips there came a cry of wildest anguish, with the words:

"My brother! Dead—oh! oh!"

"Catch her, man!" cried Sands, springing forward as he saw the lady fling up her arms with that gasping, heart-rending shriek.

The horses, frightened by that shriek, started forward, but Tipsy-toe dropped reins and whip to catch the lady in his arms, just in time to keep her from falling to the ground.

Tol Farrar sprung up and caught the leaders by the heads, checking the runaway before it grew dangerous.

Sandy Sands hastened to assist Ajax, for the lady was now in hysterics, sobbing, panting, moaning, crying aloud the name of her brother.

Mrs. King tumbled out of the stage in her motherly haste, just in time to bend over the poor girl as Sands gently lowered her to the ground. And the tall passenger who might have been a rich banker, but wasn't, shot out at the opposite door and strode swiftly up to where Tol Farrar was soothing the startled horses.

"Who was it? What name did you say, sir? Quick! five dollars if you show me where the man you named is lying!"

"Stiddy! you're skeering the critters, boss!" growled Farrar, hanging to the reins as though the lives of the entire congregation depended on his single arm.

But he was not so busy that he couldn't steal a keen, searching look into that lank visage, and noticing this, the pilgrim suddenly calmed down, his voice smooth and even as he spoke again:

"I fancied you spoke the name of a friend—a very dear friend of mine—and it naturally excited me. Of course I was wrong, but I happened to be thinking about my friend at that precise moment, and—surely you did not say Samuel Mather, sir?"

"Why wouldn't I, when it was him?" gruffly muttered Farrar, his dark eyes drooping and his thin lips compressing after an ugly fashion.

"Still, it may not be my old friend," hopefully nodded the stranger as his bony hands rubbed together. "The hope is worth what I offered. Five dollars if you take me to the body at once, sir!"

Meanwhile Sandy Sands was nobly seconding the efforts of motherly Mrs. King, and to his pocket-flask the young lady no doubt owed her speedy recovery, or rally, rather, from that sudden shock.

She sat up, despite the fat arms that would have detained her, gazing about her in piteous grief and agitation as she panted:

"My brother—dead—murdered! Let me go—I must go to him—let me go, I pray you, kind people!"

Mrs. King strove to soothe the poor lady, but her efforts served to increase rather than diminish that strong agitation, and Sandy Sands reluctantly yielded.

"You shall go, dear child, but—"

"Now—at once! Where is he? Where is my poor brother?" as she staggered to her feet, white as a corpse herself. "Found—only to lose him in death!"

The Sharp from Snap City cast a swift glance around, frowning darkly as he saw the tall passenger rapidly leaving the spot, making good use of his long, spider-like legs, running toward the deserted cabin where Tol Farrar had at length said he would find the suicide.

"You come with her, unless you can coax her to stay back," Sands hastily whispered to Mrs. King; then bidding Tipsy-toe look after the ladies, he darted away in chase of the tall passenger.

It took quite a spurt to carry him alongside the fellow, but the Sharp from Snap City might have won a fortune as a sprinter, and long be-

fore the stranger could gain the cabin which contained the body of the man whom he claimed as a friend, a sinewy hand closed on his shoulder and a stern voice uttered in his ear:

"Steady, Webb Tennant! It's a lady, remember. If it's her brother, as she now believes, surely that will be shock enough."

"I don't—what do you mean, sir?" panted the tall fellow, turning his head but never relaxing his exertions until a forcible jerk by that muscular arm brought him to a halt.

"That you remind me of a long-legged spider, jumping on a fat fly—no less!" grimly laughed the Sharp, plainly enjoying the change that came over the face of the other man.

"You know me, then?" slowly demanded the man, his bony features setting, his sunken eyes beginning to glow redly. "It was not a mistake your calling out that name, a bit ago, as you first came up?"

"The ear-marks are too plain for a man of experience to ever mistake them, dear fellow," laughed Sands, slipping an arm through that of his fellow-passenger, and moving toward the now not very far away cabin where a dead man lay waiting their coming.

"All right, Mr. Sandy Sands. I'm not ashamed of my name, or I'd have tried to cover those ear-marks over with a disguise. What was it you said about a lady, back yonder?"

"I never care to chew my words twice, Webb Tennant. And even if I wanted to, there's no time. Yonder stands the cabin Tol Farrar spoke about, and a fellow standing on guard."

"Then—it can't be all a lie!"

"Hardly, but—is your life insured, dear sir?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Simply that your legal heirs will fare better if you carry an accident policy."

Before either man could say more, the man standing in front of the cabin, as though on guard, lifted a Winchester to his cheek and cried out harshly:

"Don't be in a rush, gents! Send in your names and occupations first, or—"

"What's biting you, Dan Dillon?" sharply cried Sandy Sands as he stepped in front of Webb Tennant. "Tol Farrar sent us here. He stopped the stage with a cock-and-bull story about somebody having done away with himself. Was he lying?"

"Worse luck—no!" drawing a long breath as of relief, lowering his weapon and brushing a hand across his brow. "He's in yonder, cold as a stone, poor Sam! And only last night he was—ugh!" with a quick shiver that shook his frame from crown to sole.

"You two found him, then?" asked Sands, his grip tightening on the arm of Tennant as that worthy tried to pass by to enter the cabin.

"Three of us; we sent Dick Wendling on to town to carry the news, and Farrar left me here while he tried to stop the stage. You see," his tones waxing confidential as though he found courage in company, "we were out on a little hunt, and came by this place. We stopped for a drink, and reckoned the cabin'd be a good place to eat our lunch in. But when we saw that—look at the doorstep, will you!"

His finger trembled a bit as it pointed to the stone slab in front of the building. Across this an irregular stream of blood had run, now dried by the warm sun.

Sandy Sands opened his fingers, and Webb Tennant, with barely a glance at the tell-tale evidence in passing, opened the door and flung it wide, to admit the afternoon light.

It fell upon a grewsome sight, but, instead of shrinking from it, the tall passenger drew nearer and then dropped on his knees beside the corpse.

There could be no questioning that fact; from that ghastly wound in the right temple, life must have e-caped instantly. Not only was the skull pierced at that point, but the entire top of the head seemed one mass of shattered bones, blood and clotted hair.

"Just as we found him—poor fellow!" whispered Dillon as he bore Sandy Sands company across the threshold. "We didn't dare touch him, until others could see just how he was discovered, you know."

The dead man lay on his back, with limbs awkwardly disposed, just as a man might fall when overtaken by instant death while standing erect. His right arm was turned partly upward, and his fingers were still closed about the silver and gutta-percha butt of a heavy revolver.

"That's why we reckoned 'twas suicide, pard," whispered Dillon, noting the course taken by his companion's eyes just then. "I'd heap rather 'twas proved murder, for then we'd stand some show of getting even by hunting down the man that did it!"

Webb Tennant paid no attention to either of the two men, and if he heard their subdued speech, he made no sign. He seemed noting every fact about the corpse, before touching it. But then, with one finger, he lifted a damp curl that hung over the left temple, revealing a curious scar, shaped like a triangle.

"That settles it!" he grated, almost viciously, flashing a lurid glance up into the pale face of Sandy Sands. "He's my man!"

"Button up, curse you!" grated the other, catching Tennant by an arm and jerking him to

his feet, at the same time swinging him toward the further side of the cabin. "She's coming—don't you hear?"

Even if he had seen fit to interfere further, there was no time, for, even as he spoke, the lady passenger sprung through the open door, and, after one wild look at that ghastly object, dropped to her knees beside the corpse, gasping hoarsely:

"Brother! dead—murdered by—"

She choked, then giving one awful cry, lost her senses entirely.

CHAPTER VII.

SANDY SANDS DROPS A HINT.

As the poor girl—for in her wild grief and utter abandon she seemed but little more—sunk in a death-like faint across the body of the dead man, Alexander Sands sprung forward to her assistance.

He picked her up in his strong arms as tenderly as he could have handled an own sister. He bore her from the room of death, out into the balmy mountain air, his first thought being to guard against her eyes opening upon that ghastly spectacle within.

"Here—you!" he cried, catching sight of the more than buxom figure of Mrs. King, hurrying, or being hurried over the rough ground by the united aid of Tipsy-toe and the second male passenger. "This way! Do your level best for the poor child, and draw on me at sight, for—"

The good lady almost forgot her own fright and tribulations as she beheld that helpless being, and though she had hardly breath enough left to gasp a word, Sandy Sands knew that she would do all that lay in her power to bring the sufferer around.

"Over by the spring, I reckon," he nodded, striding off in that direction, guided by the lay of the ground rather than any prior knowledge. "She mustn't wake up to see that—the body is in yonder."

Mrs. King panted anew as she cast a shivering look toward the dilapidated shanty, but in his eager desire to assist the fair girl, Tipsy-toe fairly bent his back as he shoved the elderly lady toward the spring, whither the man from Snap City was bearing his lifeless burden.

While this was taking place outside of the cabin, inside the ruined shack two men were gazing at each other across the corpse with bright eyes and colorless faces.

"Your man?" echoed Dan Dillon, catching up the words let fall by Webb Tennant, in his intense excitement at discovering that triangular scar. "Then you know him? You've met him before this?"

The tall passenger gave a start and turned his glittering eyes toward the gambler. So keenly did they glow, that Dillon flinched a bit before he could rally to fairly meet that gaze.

"You asked—who is she? What is she?" huskily mumbled Tennant, pointing his words by a short nod toward the open door, showing such agitation, real or assumed, that Dan Dillon immediately "braced up."

"How should I say? Didn't you come in the hearse with her?"

"The—eh?"

"Come off!" with an impatient frown. "T stage, of course."

"Yes, I came by stage, but—"

"You said something about this poor de being 'your man.' What did you mean that?"

"I thought—I still think that he is—maybe was wrong, but—" mumbled Tennant, crouching down beside the body and swiftly unfastening the coat which had remained tightly buttoned until now.

Dillon started forward a pace and thrust out a hand as though to check the stranger, but then fell back again, casting a startled look toward the door.

He heard rapid footsteps, and then Sandy Sands re-entered the cabin, stopping short as he saw what Webb Tennant was doing.

There was something strangely ghoul-like in the manner as well as in the thin, bony face of the tall passenger, just then. His long fingers had opened the bosom of the dead man, drawing therefrom a small package, or rather collection of articles, among them a letter and a thin notebook.

And, as Sandy Sands stepped quickly forward, both pair of eyes fell on the face of a small photograph; a fair, sweet young face, whose smile seemed strangely out of place, resting as the picture did just over that stilled heart.

A curious sound escaped the thin lips of Webb Tennant, but before it could fairly shape itself into words, Sandy gripped him tightly by the wrist, swiftly whispering:

"Button up, Spider-web, or I'll lift your roof—sure!"

"How dare—you?"

The tall passenger tried to wrest his hand free, but paused as his startled eyes told him whom he had to deal with. The struggle, brief though it was, pushed him past the head of the dead man, and for a single breath Sandy Sands was leaning diagonally across the corpse.

Only for an instant, for then he released Tennant and drew back, turning his face toward

the doorway through which came the rapid clattering of horses' hoofs.

He had just time to catch a glimpse of a rider leaping from the back of a noble black steed, when Dan Dillon cut off his view by leaving the cabin. Then a curse came from Tennant, whose eyes glowed like those of a furious wild beast as they rested on the breast of the dead man.

"Gone—where?" he gasped, a trembling finger pointing to the spot where the letter, the photograph and the notebook had rested but a few seconds earlier.

"For shame, light-fingers!" breathed Sandy Sands, an expression of exaggerated horror overspreading his handsome countenance.

"I'll hold you responsible!" hissed Tennant, harshly.

There was time for no more words. Dan Dillon was loudly beginning the story over, which he had told the two men now inside the cabin where such an awful tragedy had taken place, but Fenn Terry would not wait to hear him through.

"Not—say you're lying, Dan Dillon!" he hoarsely cried as the burly gambler pronounced the name of Social Sam.

He did not pause for the denial he asked, but without paying attention to aught else, entered the cabin and bent over the corpse.

Sandy Sands drew away, one hand almost fiercely gripping the arm of Webb Tennant as he watched the face of the new-comer.

It furnished a curious exhibition of mingled fear, hope and half-smothered rage just then. Partially blinded by coming from the still brilliant rays of the declining sun, Fenn Terry could not at first do more than make out the shape of a human being lying in the shadow cast by his own bending figure, and it was not until he moved around the body that he could distinguish its features with anything like certainty.

He gave a recoiling start, catching his breath sharply; then rallied and stooped lower, gazing anxiously into that discolored face.

"Sam—Mather—I can't believe it, even—" he gasped, his voice so husky as to be hardly recognizable; but, as he found the last faint doubts slipping away—as he fully recognized the young man whom he had called his friend and "partner," a fierce cry parted his pale lips, and he sprang erect, his hands tightly clinched as they rose above his head.

"Who did this dastardly deed? Who murdered my poor friend, Dan Dillon? Who, I say, Tol Farrar?" he cried, hoarsely, his sinewy frame quivering with intense emotion.

"Not there, or he's a dandy for acting," mentally decided the Sharp from Snap City, with a barely perceptible nod.

"Who but him own self?" growled Farrar, lingering just outside the doorway, his ferret-like eyes glittering beneath his bushy brows as they noted those two figures near the rear wall of the cabin.

"It looks mighty like it, Terry," nodded Dillon, with a glance at the weapon gripped by the dead man's fingers. "We found him by pure chance, and he was lying just like you see now. Nobody touched him but that lengthy gent in yonder, who—"

"Who is he? Who are you, sir?"

"We were with the stage when Tol Farrar held it up," coolly explained Sands, moving around the body and bringing Webb Tennant with him. "My name is Sands. This gentleman is John Brown. He simply tried to find out if a spark of life was left, you understand."

But Fenn Terry was paying slight attention to this smooth explanation. His eyes were fixed on the ghastly countenance of his dead friend. His pale lips quivered, and he seemed shaken by powerful grief.

"Dead! I can't believe it, even yet," he muttered, seemingly alone with his friend. "And only last night— Sam, Sam, if you had only listened to me!"

He broke off with a half-smothered groan, and Dillon ventured:

"That's just what cuts so deep, Terry. Only last night he was doing the grand, as he always called one of his little rackets. And never a one of us all did more than laugh at what we took to be his wild joking. Just laughed, mind ye! And there he lies, dead! And we just laughed at his wild talk of suicide!"

Fenn Terry wheeled toward the gambler, his right hand clinched and partly drawn back as though for a stroke; but just then the voice of a woman cried out:

"Mr. Terry! Fenn!"

"Mother! you here at such a time?" cried the man, springing out of the cabin, a startled look in his dark eyes as they rested upon the portly figure of Mrs. King.

"Isn't it just awful, step-son?" panted the woman, her fat hands going up, to fall with a helpless weight. "The poor, helpless child! And she telling me what a joyful surprise she had been planning all the way from— Oh, dear! If a body was to ask me which I was standing on, I couldn't tell my head from my feet!"

"You haven't been in there, mother? You don't mean—"

"I wouldn't if you was to drag me, step-son!" her hands again rising and falling with a jelly-

like shiver. "I meant—his sister. And she only—"

"Whose sister? Not—you can't mean Sam's sister?" almost viciously grated Terry, as he caught the agitated woman by an arm with a vigor that drew a little cry of pain from her lips.

"She said so—I don't know—if you'd only come help bring the poor child back to life again, step-son! I've tried and tried—"

With an ejaculation that was almost an oath in its hot impatience, Fenn Terry turned in the direction that fat hand was pointing, stepping rapidly as he caught sight of Topsytoe and another man standing near a prostrate figure resting near the little spring. Even at that distance there was something about that pale, still face which sent a wave of color over his own features, leaving them paler than ever as his eyes saw more clearly.

"His sister? Sam Mather's sister? Then—were you all crazy, to let a girl like that look upon such an ugly sight?"

"We tried our level best, Mr. Terry," muttered Topsytoe, falling back a pace as the mine-owner came striding forward. "But wild hosses couldn't 'a' held her back after what that durned fool Tol Farrar said. An' then— You know her, boss?"

He showed his natural curiosity in this question, for, as he gained a fair view of that face—lovely still in its corpse-like pallor—Fenn Terry gave a choking gasp, actually reeling dizzily for a moment. But he as quickly rallied, muttering thickly:

"Yes—it's Sam's sister. She mustn't—Where is the stage?"

"Whar we left it, in the trail."

"Show me the nearest way," as he stooped to lift the senseless form in his strong arms. "She must have medical aid as quickly as possible, and it's likely you'll meet Doc Kemper on the road. Keep an eye out for him; and mother, you must go with the poor child. Take her right to your house, and—"

"If I live to get there!" groaned the poor woman, waddling away in the wake of her step-son.

Nearly all of this had been witnessed by both Sandy Sands and Webb Tennant, each of whom seemed deeply interested in the affair, since they followed after until the cabin was lost to view. Then Sands checked both himself and his companion, lifting a hand until his fingers almost brushed the long nose of the tall passenger, saying softly:

"Must we have yet another terrible accident, Spider-web?"

CHAPTER VIII.

OFFERING BAIL FOR A DEAD MAN.

WEBB TENNANT shrunk visibly, and little marvel that he should; for inside of those nearly straight fingers, hidden from all other eyes save those of the man whom he addressed, the Sharp from Snap City held a wide-mouthed derringer, the black bore staring the tall passenger squarely in the eye.

"What do you mean, man?" he muttered, that red glow coming back to his sunken eyes, a hand moving toward his hidden weapons.

"Empty fingers, Spider!" coolly warned Sands, a spark of fire leaping into his own eyes as they detected that action. "You can't begin to draw quick enough; and why should you try?"

"When you jump me like a road-agent?"

"Am I not purring soft and smooth as any pet kitten you ever run up against, Spider-web? Haven't I taken pains to coax you out here in the brush and rocks, simply to spare your manly feelings by saving you the necessity of kneeling before witnesses?"

"What do you want, anyway?" scowled the tall passenger, his hand swinging empty by his side. "Who are you? What do you take me for?"

"Sling 'em at me separate, pardner," laughed the Sharp, lightly; but then his face grew grave and hard as he added: "I know what you are: a bloodhound, on a mighty hot trail."

"If you really know me—"

"Haven't I called you by your name? You are Webb Tennant, the notorious— Pardon," with a mock bow, "I should have said *famous* detective, better known among the sinful as Spider-web."

"Knowing so much, you ought to know more: that I never leave a trail until I've reached the further end of it."

"And that lies in yonder shack—precisely so," nodded Sands, in nowise disturbed. "You came here in hopes of finding the young fellow known as Social Sam, or Samuel Mather."

"I have found him!"

"So you believe, and I reckon you're right. I'm not kicking against *that*, mind you," all trace of flippancy vanishing to give place to a certain grim earnestness that strongly impressed the detective as he watched and listened. "Identify your game as thoroughly as you please, though that scar on his left temple ought to be sufficient to clear or to condemn the poor fellow."

"I could have got along without that, but finding it unbroken by the wound makes the proof all the more binding."

"Just so. As I said, make perfectly sure that he is your game, but—and you can spell that word with the biggest letters in the whole type-foundry, Tennant! But—keep your discoveries secret for the present, or there'll be another sudden death for people to marvel over!"

"Once more: what do you mean?"

"Let on that Social Sam was a road-agent, and I'll kill you!"

Evenly, quietly, without the slightest emphasis or show of excitement, Sandy Sands gave this threat utterance; but as Webb Tennant gazed squarely into those dark gray eyes, he knew that each and every word was good as sworn to.

A man might well have found excuse for shrinking in the face of such a deadly threat, but Webb Tennant was no coward, whatever else he might be. And the fire brightened in his deep-set eyes as he slowly demanded:

"Who are you? What is this dead man to you that you ruffle up so mighty brash?"

"Worse than nothing, now the fellow is dead," was the cool reply.

"Well, he's worth just one thousand dollars to me, dead or alive!"

"Provided you could fully identify him with the man for whom that reward was offered."

"I have already identified him!"

"In your own mind," with a grim smile. "But, what if I were to make oath that you were mistaken?"

"Do you make such an oath?"

"I might, if I tried hard enough, no doubt, but—a bird in the hand is worth heap sight more than a couple in the bush, Tennant, and a reward tight gripped in your fist ought to be better than two yet floating in the air."

As he spoke, the Sharp stepped back a little, carrying himself out of reach of Tennant in case that worthy should attempt to turn the tables on him with a swift movement while his own hands were differently engaged. The ugly-looking derringer vanished from view, though whether into a pocket or up his sleeve, even keen-eyed Spider-web could not fully decide.

"Wind is all right, when you haven't anything more substantial to sup upon," added Sands, bringing a corpulent pocketbook from its place of hiding, opening it and taking several bills from a number of others as he rattled on: "But it's little chunks like these that puts fat on one's ribs! See—five of 'em," laughing softly as he deftly fluttered the notes after a fashion that displayed a letter C on an end of each. "That's a joke, pardner, but these are sober earnest. Take 'em."

"What for?" frowned Tennant, glancing quickly from money to master, plainly puzzled by the words and action. "Do you mean that as a bribe?"

"Not a bit of it, my dear fellow!"

"What do you mean, then?"

"Business, pure and simple. I'm offering to purchase all your knowledge of the man lying dead over yonder. Take the money; forget that you ever saw or heard of the poor devil before this minute."

Sandy Sands fluttered the bills enticingly, once more, holding them out toward the tall passenger. But Webb Tennant put both hands behind his back, as though the better to resist temptation, shaking his head doggedly while uttering:

"I'd rather not; for good reasons. One of which is that the reward offered for the arrest of the man known as Social Sam is just double the sum you offer. And that reward is sure, for it reads dead or living!"

"But it remains to be collected. And you haven't even proved that the body in yonder was once the man you want."

"I can prove it by your own lips, man," laughed Tennant, his thin lips curling back and exposing his long, narrow teeth for a moment. "I can put you in the box and make you swear to that triangular scar."

"You mean you could *try* to put me in the box, but— Say I were to put you in a box beforehand?"

"Does that mean a coffin?" sneered Tennant.

"Let that flea stick for the moment," coolly nodded Sands, once more shaking his banknotes before the face of the detective. "Will you take the money and forget?"

"I can't forget that it's only half-price," bowed Tennant. "I've done all the hard work; I've spent all the money needed; I'd be worse than a fool to take half, when I only need to say a few score words to receive the whole amount."

"What doth it profit a man if he goes for gold and comes back chuck full of lead?" drawled the sharp, a wicked light in his eyes.

"Is that another threat?"

"The same old one, only in a slightly different dress."

"And you mean it?"

"From start to finish and all the way back again, Webb Tennant," said Sands, dropping his carelessness and speaking in tones that carried conviction with them. "I hate to even think of shedding blood, but, rather than have that poor young lady doubly shocked, I'll fix you for planting with as little remorse as I'd crush the head of a rattlesnake that tried to bite my heel!"

Once more that derringer stared Webb Tennant squarely in the face, and there was no sign of jesting in the dark-gray eyes that gazed at him over the loaded weapon.

But, the detective never flinched an inch. He made no attempt to draw a weapon or to strike a blow, for he could see that any such attempt would but hasten his own death. He even smiled as he spoke:

"After all, I see you don't begin to know me, Mr. Sands."

"I do know you," was the swift retort. "And I know you so well that I know even more: know that I have only to utter your name aloud—only to point you out as Webb Tennant, or Spider-web, the bloodhound and man-hunter—to have half the men of this region out in search for you and your heart's blood!"

The detective had unflinchingly faced one man and his deadly weapon, but he flinched visibly at this, his deep-sunken eyes giving an uneasy glance around them, as though already anticipating that awful cry for blood.

Sandy Sands noted this, and improved the opening.

"You'd never leave this region on your own legs, Tennant, and that is why I gave your name as John Brown, back yonder. Keep that name, take the money I offer you, and hold your tongue for—say two weeks."

"Then—you don't mean for all time?" hesitated Tennant.

"I did, at first, but I'll come down a peg if you'll come half-way to meet me," nodded the Sharp, his manner changing with his tones. "If it will gild the pill any, just call it bail for the dead man over yonder. And—what's the odds?" with a short laugh as he again took out the pocketbook and selected bills enough to double the amount he had originally offered the detective. "There's your thousand, pardner; stow 'em away and tie a double knot in that tongue of yours!"

A bony hand went out, but it was to push the money-laden fingers aside, not to accept the bribe. And Tennant spoke quickly:

"I'm not positive I know just what you're trying to bind me to, Mr. Sands. Out with it, in plain terms!"

"Your silence for two weeks from date, unless I give you leave to speak out sooner," was the prompt reply.

"At the expiration of that period I'll be free to tell all I know about the dead man, back in yonder cabin?"

"So far as I am concerned, yes," his voice growing graver as he added: "The fellow, living or dead, is worse than nothing to me. All I am worrying about is his sister. She has received a terrible shock in finding a corpse, where she thought to meet a kind, true, honest, loving and living relative."

"That is bad enough, Heaven knows! But, let it leak out that her dead brother is accused of being a road-agent, perhaps with innocent blood crimsoning his hand, and the poor child will never rally—it would kill her, just as surely as that bullet killed Social Sam!"

"You know the young lady, then?" ventured Tennant.

"Only as I rode with her from Snap City," was the quiet reply.

"I didn't know—I thought that, maybe, she was an old friend."

"That's all right, pardner. You fancied a hidden romance, and you got left, as you deserved," once more holding out the bank-notes. "Now you know all I ask of you; silence for two weeks, or until the lady can get away from this place. Then you can print 'road-agent' all over his grave, if it so pleases you."

"Put up your money, Mr. Sands. I'll do what you ask without any such security, blood-sucker though you deem me!"

"Take it, man! It's only right. I'm simply giving bail for the dead man, so that, if he should fool you, after all, you'll be nothing out through my interference. Take it or—must I pull my gun again?"

Thus urged, Webb Tennant took the bills and stowed them carefully away in his bosom, when Sandy Sands added:

"Never mind the receipt, pardner! I've got a witness to the whole transaction, and he can swear to the payment in case you try to chisel me out of the ducats!"

"What!" ejaculated Tennant, sharply. "Who? Where? Why?"

"Don't know who, or why, but there's a fellow watching us behind that big rock, yonder!" cried the Sharp, his eyes glowing vividly. "You go to the left, and we'll investigate, just for luck!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE DEAD MAN'S LEGACY.

WITH real or admirably-assumed excitement, Sandy Sands pointed out a great mass of rock lying only a few rods away, its base fringed with bushes and its cracked sides partly covered with clinging vines.

"Spot him, face or figure, if you have to run your legs off trying to pick him up, man!" he added, giving Webb Tennant a vigorous shove toward that side of the rocky mass indicated. "I'll cut 'round this way and—don't shoot unless you *have* to, pard!"

The detective sprung away without stopping to ask questions, his gaunt visage hard set, his sunken eyes all aglow. For no one knew better than he how much it might mean to have his real name and occupation made known in that section. There were men who, honest enough in themselves, hated him worse than they hated the hangman, because of his pitiless skill through which friend or relative had come to grief.

As Tennant took one side of the huge rock, Sands chose the other, as though with the intention of forcing the spy and eavesdropper to trust to headlong flight for safety rather than give him a chance to foil them by dodging; but the Sharp only took a second step after once striking cover. And that step was to bring his eyes to an opening through which he might better watch a covert almost directly opposite the rocky mass.

"Man or beast—which was it?" he muttered, every sense on the keen alert, his gaze trying to pierce the leafy screen behind which he felt reasonably confident a spy had been watching them. "Hope Spider won't break his neck on his wild-goose chase, but—good enough, Mr. Ferguson!"

A scrubby bush that grew close to the base of a gray boulder gave a shiver too violent to have been caused by the little wind there was afloat in that sheltered spot, and then the keen-eyed sport caught a glimpse of a dark face cautiously parting the leaves.

Not much more than a glimpse, but their positions were such that the light fell squarely across the face, and though it remained in sight but a single breath, that was long enough for Sandy Sands to recognize its owner.

It was the face of the man who had halted the stage and asked Ajax Tipsytee to give room for a suicide. And as Tol Farrar gazed at the rocky mass around which the two men had sprung but a few seconds before, there was an expression of malignant triumph and deadly hatred only too plainly printed upon his face.

"Which one, my gentle cherub?" breathed the Sharp from Snap City, with just the ghost of a smile coming into his face as he saw Farrar lift a clinched fist and shake it in that direction. "If you mean me, I feel mighty sorry for you. But, if it's Spider-web— Well, unless that ugly mug lies, I reckon I'll have to put in a claim for that head-money if I want to keep even!"

He saw that menacing face withdrawn and then called his sense of hearing into play. It told him that Farrar was creeping away from his ambush, and, with a quick, comprehensive glance around him, Sands also changed his position.

He kept under cover and picked his way without making a sound to betray his passage, though he covered the ground with rapidity sufficient to effect his purpose, and crouched beneath a friendly bush only a few yards distant from where the spy crossed his front, making his way back to the deserted cabin.

The man from Snap City never moved a muscle until the eavesdropper, now fully identified as Tol Farrar, passed out of sight and hearing. Then he rose, brushing the dust from his garments, smiling to himself as he murmured:

"That partly explains the ugly look I caught on his face at the shack, and I'll need lose no sleep on *your* account, Mr. Farrar. Spider-web's his game, and unless I drop a hint that way, he'll rake it in, too! With my precious ducats, as well! Which reminds me of that sweet little psalm beginning 'A fool and his money might soon dissolve partnership!'"

The thought seemed to give him almost as much amusement as uneasiness, judging from the expression of his face as he once more moved in the direction of the old shanty.

"Lightly come, easily go! Snap City pays for it all, gents, and I'll collect both principal and interest from New Dorado if one of her estimable citizens goes through Spider-web!"

Even before this, Sandy Sands became aware that other beings were in that vicinity, and he showed no surprise when he saw some half-dozen men in the opening before the deserted house. It was only what might have been expected after what Fenn Terry said.

Dick Wendling had spread the news at New Dorado, and these men had out-spied their mates in their haste to see the grim sight.

Mr. Sands had barely time to take note of this, and catch a glimpse of Webb Tennant hurrying toward him, when a horseman came trotting briskly through the bushes, springing to the ground and taking a pair of old-fashioned saddle-bags from the cantle as he did so.

"The doctor, for rocks!" muttered the Sharp, as he moved forward and slipped inside the room, close at the heels of the physician.

"Keep the gang back, Dillon!" sharply spoke the doctor, with a frown as the light was shut off by the eager witnesses. "I've got to have light, if I have to drill windows through every man-jack of 'em!"

Just then, if never before, Dr. David Kemper was a man of authority, and at his speech the men fell back, leaving an unobstructed passage for the light, but keeping close enough to hear all that might be spoken inside the cabin.

Dr. Kemper lost little time in preliminaries. A single glance showed him that life could have

lingered but a few seconds after that shot was fired; but he touched the cold wrist, bent an ear to the heart-region, felt of the terribly-shattered skull, then spoke:

"The man is dead, and beyond the reach of medicine. I can do nothing more, unless it be to search his body for proofs of his identity."

"Maybe you'd better, Doc, though I reckon it's only too plain who the poor fellow is—or was," hesitated Dillon, who stood leaning against the rear wall of the cabin.

If he heard, Dr. Kemper paid no attention. He pushed his saddle-bags to one side, out of the way, and as he did so, a short ejaculation escaped his lips, and he caught up a small, thin notebook from where it had been lying in the shadow of the corpse.

Instinctively Sandy Sands lifted a hand to his own breast, but even as he did this he knew that the book must be the one Webb Tennant had brought to light, together with the letter and the photograph.

"Slipped off when I nailed the others, must be," mentally decided Sands, a frown gathering his brows for the instant.

"Memorandum-book. Name written on cover—Samuel Mather," the physician said, leaning toward the door for a clearer light.

"You saw me pick it up, I believe, Dillon?"

"It's his, sure enough," nodded the burly gambler.

Dr. Kemper deftly searched the body, but without much success in making discoveries. There was no money found, and only a few small trifles such as any man might naturally carry about with him. Until, at length, the doctor found a crumpled bit of paper deep down in a side-pocket, which drew another sharp ejaculation from his lips as he opened it and let the light fall squarely across its face.

"Only a picture, but—the picture of a kid!"

"What?" gasped Dillon, springing forward to stare at the rude drawing on the torn leaf. "I don't believe—it is! Holy smoke, Doc!" he hoarsely muttered, as he drew back a bit, his eyes glowing brightly. "You don't reckon that Sam was—"

"It's not my part to guess at anything, sir," was the curt retort, as Kemper glanced at the rounded corners of the torn leaf, then compared it with the edges of the notebook. "What I'm after is plain facts."

He opened the book, running over the leaves, to pause as he drew near the last cover. A leaf had been torn out, and when he made the comparison, the ragged edges perfectly matched the paper on which the kid had been drawn.

"Fact number one, gentlemen!" Kemper said, with a grim nod. "And, if my eyes didn't deceive me, there's at least one other fact to be found inside these covers. I thought so!" he added, a moment later, as he paused at a page filled with writing. "This is not a murder, gentlemen, but a case of deliberate suicide!"

"Who says that?" cried a harsh voice from outside, and before an answer could be given, Fenn Terry pushed his way through the ranks of the eager witnesses, crossing the threshold and glancing from face to face, his fists doubled, his eyes all aglow. "I say that my poor friend was foully murdered, and I'll give five hundred dollars out of my own pocket to the man who'll bring his assassin to justice!"

There was a brief silence after this fierce outburst, then Dillon gave a short, odd laugh as he said:

"I'd like the ducats mighty well, Mr. Terry, but if I was to try to earn 'em that way, Social Sam would be the first to call me a fool!"

"What do you mean by that, Dan Dillon?"

"Ask Doc, Kemper, pardner."

"There has been no murder, Mr. Terry. It is a clear case of suicide, or else Samuel Mather wrote himself down a liar and self-slanderer," said the physician, glancing over his shoulder as he spoke.

"I—I don't understand you, sir!" faltered Terry, turning pale.

"The explanation is easy, though. I found this memorandum on the body. It bears the name of Samuel Mather. A leaf has been torn from it, and on that leaf is drawn the figure of a kid."

"You don't—the man who says Sam Mather belonged to the gang of Captain Kidd, lies like a dog!"

"I haven't said so, as yet, sir," was the quiet retort. "I'm simply detailing facts. But, if you want to know who has accused your friend of being a Billy-goat—listen!"

Holding the notebook where the light fell across it, he read:

"TO THOSE WHO FIND MY BODY:—

"I've played my last stake—and lost! Money spent. Nerves failing. Friends—what man ever had one?"

"I've run, dodged, hid, doubled, for years, but it's no use. He's on my trail, and his scent never fails him! There's only one way, and I take it now; the pistol route!"

"If any man dare admit his friendship after reading these lines, I beg him to kill the devil who comes to claim my body. If not—I leave my dying curse as a legacy for the pitiless bloodhound who has made my life a hell on earth for more years than I care to count!"

SAMUEL MATHER."

Dr. Kemper added:

"As his friend, you ought to be familiar with his writing, Mr. Terry. Will you look at the lines and say if I read them aright?"

Terry took the notebook, but his hands trembled, his sight seemed to fail him, for he repeatedly brushed a hand across them before he could gaze steadily at that strange note.

"Kid or no kid, he was pure grit, anyway!" muttered Dillon, with a grim sort of approval in his face as he looked at the dead man. "He lived a true sport to the very last!"

"By the way, doctor," called out the Sharp from Snap City from his position just inside the door. "Have you found the bit of lead that did the work?"

"I felt it while making my examination. It lies just under the scalp," said Kemper, drawing an instrument and bending over the corpse for an instant, then holding up the battered bullet where all could see. "The point is knocked out of shape, but by the base of the bullet you can see that it would fit his pistol: .44 caliber."

"Just so. But—doctor?"

"What is it? Who are you, anyway?" with an impatient frown.

"One who is trying to solve a mighty riddle," smiled Sands. "Is it possible that the poor fellow's arm is made of soft rubber?"

CHAPTER X.

"NOT SUICIDE, BUT MURDER!"

DR. KEMPER sprang to his feet with an indignant cry.

"Is this a time or place for buffoonery, sir? Whatever he may have been in life—whatever punishment he may have deserved living, as a corpse he should and shall be treated with common decency!"

"My sentiments, exactly, doctor," frankly assured the Sharp, lifting an open hand as a signal of peace. "And that he might be respected without even the reservation you hint at, I asked you that question."

"Which is flat nonsense on the face of it?"

"I suspected as much at the time, but you seemed so very sure it was a case of suicide, that I tried to find an excuse for siding with you. So—*is* his arm made of soft rubber?"

"Are you crazy? Or only drunk?"

"Because, if his arm *isn't* stretchable, or telescopic, how do you account for the lack of powder burns about the bullet-hole, doctor?"

Dr. Kemper gave a start, his eyes opening widely and his lower jaw drooping. But, checking his speech, he turned once more to the body, bending over the better to see in that failing light.

It was only too true!

Though discolored and marked with blood, now dried in ghastly lines, there were no burns, no stains such as ought to have followed a shot at such close quarters.

"I knew it!" cried Fenn Terry, excitedly, pushing the physician aside to thoroughly satisfy himself. "It is not suicide, but murder!"

For a time all was utter confusion. The men outside, now greatly increased in numbers as curious footmen from town kept straggling in, drawn to the deserted cabin by that morbid feeling which seems born with us all, crowded in at the door until the body of Social Sam was hedged in by a living fence.

In vain Dr. Kemper sternly ordered the men outside. They had come to see, and would see all there was visible before they could rest content. And realizing this, Sandy Sands made a proposal which was finally accepted as being the shortest way out of the difficulty.

The room was cleared of all living beings, then the men were permitted to enter, two at a time, to briefly view the body, then fall outside to give others a chance.

When this was done, and all had taken their turn, Dr. Kemper, Fenn Terry, with two others of whom they each selected one, entered the cabin and again searched the body, proceeding deliberately, systematically.

Terry called particular attention to the total absence of powder-marks about the wound, and Dr. Kemper frankly admitted the fact. Then, taking them in turn, each garment worn by the dead man was carefully searched; but without finding any fresh clues until, at Terry's own suggestion, the corpse was turned over, as the easiest method of moving it.

He started back with a gasping cry, staring at the plank on which Social Sam had lain. For there, looking like some grim trophy of an Indian warrior, lay a combined wig and beard of long, coarse black hair!

"Cap'n Kidd, by gravy!" ejaculated one of the searchers, catching up the disguise and holding it where all might see. "I kin sw'ar to that, fer didn't the durn critter strip me clean, no longer'n last month?"

"Not *his*—not *Sam's*!" doggedly muttered Terry, still holding firm in his faith. "The devil who murdered him must have dropped it there, and couldn't find it after poor Mather fell dead!"

"There is one chamber of his pistol empty, and the powder-marks are fresh enough," quiet-

ly said Kemper, having with some difficulty removed the weapon from that death-grip. "You will take notice, friends?"

"It's plenty plain for a blind man to see!" grimly nodded the man who still held that disguise. "I never thought it o' Sam, but—"

"It's a lie, and I know it, gentlemen," interposed Terry, calming himself with an evident effort. "You may try to blacken his memory if you like the business, but I'll never let up until I've proved him innocent of all wrong."

"We are trying to get at the plain facts; nothing more, nothing less," returned Kemper, leading the way outside where the crowd was impatiently awaiting the result of their investigation. "I'd give a few dollars if I'd never been mixed up in the ugly affair, but now I'm in it, I'm there to stay until I've done my whole duty."

The crowd gathered around, eager to see and hear, their curiosity intensified by a glimpse of the sable disguise which Mark Brandow still held in his hand.

"It's an ugly affair, gentlemen," began the doctor, lifting a hand to command order and silence. "If I could have my own way, I would drop it all right now and right here, but—"

"We want to hear the whole yarn, Doc!"

"You shall learn all that we have discovered, if you'll only keep still and listen. You were one of those who discovered the body, I believe, Mr. Dillon?"

"One of 'em—yes," asserted the gambler. "Tol Farrar and Dick Wendling were with me. On a little tramp for game, you understand."

He went on to tell of the discovery, just as he had told it before, and his two mates were called up to corroborate his statement.

When they drew back, Kemper spoke up again, describing the state of the body when he first saw it, with the nature of the wound, which he declared must have produced instant death. Then he went on to tell how he found the notebook on the floor close beside the body, just as though it had dropped from the dead man's bosom when he fell.

At this point Webb Tennant flashed a glance at Sandy Sands, who as silently bade him hold his peace for the present.

"This is the book, gentlemen," continued Kemper, holding the article up where all might see. "On its cover is written the name of Samuel Mather, better known to many of you, perhaps, as Social Sam. And inside its covers I found a page of writing, which reads like this."

He read aloud the words which had so shaken Fenn Terry, and there came a low but eager chorus from the crowd as his voice died away. The verdict was already formed, but it remained unuttered as Dr. Kemper once more signed for silence and patience.

"In one of the dead man's pockets, I found a scrap of paper; this one, gentlemen," holding it up to view. "It appears to be a leaf torn from a small, narrow book. Its edges are red, its corners rounded; and *this* end, as you may note, is torn in an irregular fashion. On one side the paper is blank, save for the usual blue ruling, but on the other is drawn in pencil, the figure of an animal. It has curving horns, a beard depending from the lower jaw, and a short, up-turned tail."

"A kid!" cried a voice from the crowd. "Hain't we seed a-plenty of the same kind o' pictur's sence Cap'n Kidd brung his Billy-goats to these parts? Bet we *hev*, now!"

"It looks like the picture of a goat, hastily drawn, but I'm not the man to swear it is really intended for one. I'm simply making a sober statement of facts, gentlemen."

At the same time he opened the notebook at a fresh place, bending the covers and the entire leaves back, permitting a ragged edge to stand up in full view. Then, in silence, he deliberately matched the torn leaf with that edge, letting all present see that they fitted perfectly.

"One thing more, and I have done, gentlemen," he gravely said, taking the sable disguise from Mark Brandow, holding it up for a few moments, then deftly slipping it in place on his own head. "Merely to let you realize its nature, you understand," with a grim laugh as he turned around and gave all near a fair sight.

The disguise was perfect. Had they not witnessed its donning, not one of those present could have recognized its wearer.

"There you have the whole history, as far as I can give it to you, gentlemen," added Kemper, removing the disguise and tossing it back to Mark Brandow. "I've given you the simple facts. You can add them together and read the sum total to suit yourselves."

"That's easy enough: *Social Sam was Captain Kidd!*" cried one of the crowd, to have his words caught up and echoed back by a full score of other tongues.

Through it all Fenn Terry kept silence, his face pale and hard-set, his hands clinched behind his back, his dark eyes all aglow. But, even in the face of that angry, vengeful, threatening yell, he stood firm in his faith.

"I can't deny the facts, gentlemen, but I *do* deny the deductions drawn!" he cried, his voice sounding strained and unnatural. "If Sam Mather committed suicide, why is it his face don't show powder-marks? How could he blow

his own brains out and not burn his face? Will you explain that point, Dr. Kemper?"

The physician shrugged his broad shoulders.

"I don't pretend to explain anything, Mr. Terry. From start to finish I've stuck to facts; I've simply placed those facts before the crowd, leaving the rest to their judgment."

"I'd like to think it *was* murder, Terry," said Dillon, coming a little closer as he added: "But, since it's the truth we're all after, I *must* say that Sam talked mighty like suicide at the Social Hall, last night. Any man who was there and heard him, can say the same thing."

"And you let him go, without lifting a hand or saying a word to hinder him?" flashed Terry, hotly.

"I took it for some of his talk; *you* know how he'd rattle on when he was hitting the bottle heavy. You heard him yourself, last night."

"I know; and I've cursed myself ever since because I didn't stick to the poor fellow and take him out of there with me, even if I had to use force! But, all the same, I still swear that this is not suicide, and as high Heaven hears my oath! I'll never give over until the vile assassin is run down and brought to justice for his foul crime!"

"How do you explain the words written in this book?" asked Kemper, holding it up before the excited mine-owner.

"It is a cursed forgery!" snatching the book away and thrusting it into his bosom. "And so with all the rest! Sam was *murdered*—he was butchered by some devil—maybe Captain Kidd himself!"

"That is my opinion, pardner!" put in Sandy Sands, with an emphatic nod. "Captain Kidd killed him, and left all those clues to make hot-heads believe the old Goat had jumped the bars for good and all!"

"You talk mighty loud for a stranger, sir," said Kemper, keenly viewing the handsome sport. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Half-white and free-born, pardner," with a smile. "If you want my full record, take a trip to Snap City and ask for Sandy Sands. You see, pardner, I was born modest, and never could sing my own praises out loud."

"Ye'll find him whiter'n chalk, ef he's really the Sharp from Snap City, Doc," added Mark Brandow, quickly. "I never laid eyes onto him my own self, but I've hearn a mighty sight o' talk 'bout him, all samey?"

"Spare my blushes, gentlemen, I beg of you," pleaded Sandy, with a bow of mock embarrassment. "I only wanted to say that a man, even if as desperate as that writing tries to make out Sam Mather was, would never be such a fool as to brand himself a thief, robber, assassin, and general bad pill such as Captain Kidd is known, far and wide. Even if he wanted to die, and *was* that notorius villain, would he take such pains to collect all those proofs and leave them to be found on his body? Hardly! He'd have burnt them, every one, and you know that as well as I can tell you!"

Swinging around on his heel, Sandy Sands locked arms with Webb Tennant, passing out of the circle and moving slowly away from the spot.

"Button up a bit longer, pardner," he muttered, hurriedly, as the gaunt detective was about to speak. "I know what you want to say, and I'll give you a chance just as soon as we can get out of earshot."

In silence they passed out of sight of the cabin and the still excited crowd, pausing when in a secluded spot. But Sandy Sands seemed in no hurry to speak, even then; and before the silence was broken between them, a shot rung out from cover only a few yards distant.

At the same instant Sandy Sands pitched forward on his face.

CHAPTER XI.

TOL FARRAR PLEADS A MISTAKE.

HE fell as a dead man might fall, striking the ground heavily, but instead of lying there like a corpse, the Sharp from Snap City rolled over far enough to bring both hands into play, a spout of flame-tinged smoke seemed to leap from the tips of his fingers, the twin explosion blending until it was hard to say whether more than a single shot had been fired, at first.

The double report was followed by a sharp, savage cry, cut short in its utterance, but giving ample proof that at least one of those avenging missiles had found its unseen target.

"Cover, John Brown!" Sandy Sands cried, at the same time half-rolling, half-leaping to the friendly shelter of a rough boulder near by.

It all took place with such rapidity that, hardened as he was to wild events, accustomed to act on the spur of the moment, Webb Tennant still stood staring where his first involuntary leap had taken him as the stranger sport fell to the crack of that weapon.

Having given the startled detective that swift warning, Sands never wasted another glance in that direction, deftly ejecting the empty cases from and putting fresh cartridges into his deringers without the aid of his eyes. They were fixed on the covert from whence that treacherous and well-nigh fatal shot had come, and into the midst of which he had sent his own lead, guided quite as much by instinct as by the little clout

of blue smoke, now rising and scattering above the leafy twigs.

Following quickly after that double report, that fierce cry of blended pain and rage, excited shouts came from the direction of the cabin, and Sandy Sands knew that the crowd there gathered had taken the alarm and might be expected to follow up those sounds; but he kept his gaze fastened on the clump of bushes where the would-be assassin had stolen near enough to risk a shot at—which one of them?

That he had no means of knowing, just then, but he knew well enough which one the lead had marked; his face was burning as though a red-hot iron had been clapped against his cheek, and he felt the warm blood trickling down his neck as he lay there watching.

"The gang is coming, pardner—what now?" warningly cried Webb Tennant from the cover to which he had sprung. "Face them, or run and dodge?"

"Stand up to the rack, Johnny; why not?" then lifting his voice to shout loudly: "This way, gents! And pick up any two-legged maverick you run across with a fresh brand on him!"

"You're giving the rascal time to get clear, man!" almost harshly muttered Tennant, rising and coming nearer his companion in peril. "Or, did you drop him?"

"Not knowing, can't say. Shot at the sound more than anything else, and—steady, now!" as a couple of men came crashing through the stiff bushes, pistols out and carried as though eager to find something substantial on which to use them.

"What is it? Who shot? Anybody hurt?" panted the leader of the twain, flashing a glance around the spot as though expecting to see one or more dead men.

"I'm burnt a little, but reckon it's nothing bad enough to put on mourning for," said Sands, for the first time feeling of his wound, then laughing grimly as he found it nothing more than a graze, breaking the skin across his jaw just below his right ear.

"It didn't take three shots to do all that, I reckon," spluttered Mark Brandow, coming up with a number of others, just in time to hear the words. "If you shot—Snap City Sharp, by glory!"

"That's me, if my head would only steady a bit and let up this blessed whirling," nodded Sands.

"What's the meaning of all this?" sternly demanded Dr. Kemper, who came up at that instant, his dark brows gathering as he recognized the stranger who had won his dislike back at the ruined cabin.

"You tell, doctor! I was just hunting the stage trail with Mr. Brown here, when somebody flung a chunk of lead at us out of the bushes. Which one of us he wanted most, I'll never tell you, but he came nearest to calling my turn."

"A scratch," with a keen glance at the superficial wound. "You might almost have done that with a finger-nail!"

"Might, but didn't, doctor. I'm not howling so much about the graze as I am over splitting a rock with my blessed cabeza as I tripped on a root and fell; reckon you can hear the pieces flying even yet!"

With a muttered word of impatient disgust, Dr. Kemper turned about and moved back toward the cabin; and as Sandy Sands saw that he was losing ground by beating about the bush so long, he came to the point without further delay.

"The fellow fired out of yonder bushes, and I sent back a couple of bullets in return. I heard him yelp, and I reckon I broke skin, if nothing more."

"I reckon you *did*! look at the blood!" cried Brandow, who was first to plunge into the cover indicated.

The bushes made but a comparatively thin fringe running near the base of a rocky mass, and scattered over the white shingle that lay thickly along its foot, were drops of bright blood, still wet and fresh.

Sandy Sands, now seeming himself again, pushed to the front and took in the ground at a single glance. The profusion of blood-drops scattered about told him plain enough that at least one of his bullets had found its mark, but nothing was to be seen of the spy, living or dead.

"Don't crowd too fast, gents," he warned, following the red trail as it led them for a few yards along the base of the rocky mass. "I reckon we'll find the fellow before long, unless he carries a double supply of the ruby."

The end of the trail was nearer than any of them thought, though not one of them all would have suspected the truth, only for those tell-tale drops of blood, for the fugitive had turned abruptly to the left, climbing up to a ledge of rock over which grew a wild grape-vine, entirely masking it.

Sandy Sands, following the red sign, sprung up to the shelf, but as quickly leaped down again, for a hollow groan came distinctly to his ears, coming from almost immediately ahead of him.

"Treed in a hole!" he cried, then added in

grim tones: "Show up, critter, or I'll send a search-warrant in there after you!"

"Don't shoot—I'm all—shot to pieces!" came a husky, quavering voice from behind the grape-vine screen.

"Who are you, pardner?"

"Farrar—I didn't—all a mistake!" came the broken reply, and as the grape-vine trembled, a haggard, scared face came into view. "Don't shoot—where's Doc?"

"Call him, some of you," curtly said Sands, springing up to the ledge, and with more care than might have been expected under the circumstances, helping the trembling, bleeding wretch down to the level.

One of his arms was swinging heavily, shattered just above the elbow, and his breast was dripping with blood from a wound that had been inflicted by the other bullet.

"Sorry I hit you so hard, Farrar," gravely said Sands, as he took quick note of these injuries, drawing back a bit after placing the wounded man on the ground. "But you stung me sharply, and I hadn't time to ask where you'd rather have the answer planted."

"What made ye do it, man?" asked Brandow.

"I didn't mean—a mistake, I tell you!" muttered Farrar, his dark eyes roving about, to settle with a vicious gleam on the gaunt form of Webb Tennant. "Him—I wanted him, curse his liver!"

Sandy Sands whistled softly as he followed that venomous glance.

"Shot at the goose and hit the gander, eh? Well, I didn't—But here comes the doctor; make room, gentlemen, please. Give him all the chance there's left for him, please!"

Place was made, and Dr. Kemper at once set to work to check the copious flow of blood, asking no questions, for his practiced eye at a glance realized the danger of delay. He made but a superficial examination of the hurts, for the heavy bullet had passed entirely through Farrar's body, and he knew that the broken arm could wait its turn.

He was given ample room in which to work, and only those whom he summoned by name came near them; but the entire number lingered near, eager to learn the whole truth, for the time being forgetting the tragedy at the cabin in this fresh sensation.

Webb Tennant and Sandy Sands were centers of curiosity, and though neither of them relished this, they knew better than to openly flee from it, answering the questions poured in with grave patience that helped to cover the lack of real information.

Tennant declared that he knew no reason why Farrar should seek his life, as he was both a stranger to that section and to the fellow himself; while Sands declared that he had simply fired at the sound, on general principles.

"I felt his stinger, and hadn't time to ask how deep it had been sent home, you see, gentlemen," he added, gravely. "He said it was a mistake on his part, and I believe him so far. Still, he can hardly blame me for following suit."

"All the better for you, stranger," grimly added Brandow, looking at the tall passenger. "Them eyes was spittin' pure p'izen when he looked at ye, an' mebbe his hurts'll save you a grave fer a bit."

"I trust he'll get over it, and I'm more than ready to help him as far as time, care or money goes," remarked Sands. "If he has any friends here, I'm willing to pay them for their time and trouble in nursing the poor fellow through this ugly scrape."

"I'm Tol Farrar's friend," spoke up John Keenan, who had but recently come upon the scene. "I'll see that he has what care can be given, without asking any favors from you, sir!"

"You feel hard; but I'm not kicking against that, stranger," was the quiet response. "No doubt I'd act the same way my own self, if I stood on the other side of the fence. But, if you still feel in the same humor, after learning just how it all came about, you can find me easily enough, down in Dorado. Just ask for Sandy Sands, please."

"I'll bear the name in mind, and may have occasion to look you up later," smiled the sport, showing his white teeth just an instant.

"Under what name? I've shot one fellow without knowing who or what to call him, and another would be almost too much!"

"John Keenan. I run the Social Hall. But, don't lose any sleep, fearing you'll not recognize me in case I have to make any such call, for I never strike without first sounding my rattle."

Without waiting for a reply, the New Dorado sport passed over to where Tol Farrar was groaning under the skillful hands of the doctor.

As that was the principal point of interest, now that all had been explained, Sandy Sands took advantage of the fact, touching Webb Tennant on an arm as he quietly edged away from the crowd. Without a sound he was followed by the detective, and when once fairly out of sight of the gathering, Sandy Sands spoke up:

"It's an ugly, complicated bit of business all 'round, pardner, and I don't know as 'twill make it any better, running away after this fashion; but I'm going to leg it for town. Go along?"

Tennant hesitated, glancing almost wistfully toward the hidden cabin where Social Sam lay still in death. He drew a long breath that was almost a sigh, before speaking:

"Reckon I might as well. You mean to hold me to that bargain?"

"Or lay you out, Spider-web," was the grim response. "You've got your money: what more do you ask?"

There was no reply by the gaunt detective, and the strangely mated couple pressed on until they hit the stage road. Along this they pressed at a rapid pace through the twilight, only pausing when they could look down upon the town, its lights twinkling brightly.

"I'll make a spoon or spoil a horn, down yonder! Wonder which?" breathed the Sharp from Snap City, his gray eyes glowing vividly.

CHAPTER XII.

UNCOMFORTABLE SUSPICIONS.

"WILL he pull through, do you think, doctor?" asked John Keenan, as Kemper drew back from attending to the wounded man.

"That's beyond my telling," was the grave response. "He's a badly injured man, but until I've made a more thorough examination, all I might say would be little better than guess-work."

"Can he bear removal, think? But of course he must: the night air up here would surely kill him!"

"Yes; he must be taken to town. A horse litter would be best. You can have my nag, if there is none other handy."

"Thanks, but I rode out, and can manage it, I reckon. Of course you will be near at hand in case he needs your aid?"

"Of course. I'm going up now to see what Terry has been doing with the body of Sam Mather."

"Then the story is true? The poor fellow is really dead?"

"Dead as nail in door!" quoted Kemper, with a shrug of his broad shoulders, then turning away without waiting for more questioning.

The majority of the curious crowd followed after Dr. Kemper, many of them expecting an open collision between him and Fenn Terry when the two men came together again, after the harsh words which had already passed between them. A few lingered, but Keenan quickly made them keep their distance on the plea that Farrar needed all the air he could get.

The dark-browed rough lay like a corpse until he recognized the low, sympathetic voice of the Social Hall sport, then his heavy lids lifted and a faint smile crept into his ghastly-pale visage.

"I knowed you wouldn't shake me, pard," he said, his tones barely audible.

"Of course I wouldn't, pard. I'll stick to you until you're able to get back at the fellow who downed you this round."

"Don't want—the other was my meat," whispered Farrar, that vicious gleam coming back to his eyes once more. "I meant—kill him! Wasp stung me just—made me flinch and—"

"Who is he, Farrar? Just his name, then you mustn't try to talk."

"Spider—Tennant! Detective—jugged Jake, brother!"

John Keenan dropped a finger lightly on those pale lips, a soft whistle passing through his own as he arched his brows.

No need to ask further why Tol Farrar had acted with such desperation, for hardly a man in New Dorado but was fully acquainted with the history of Jacob Farrar; of how he had been hunted down by a detective, and how he put an end to his own life in jail, while awaiting trial. Every time Tol Farrar got drunk, he was sure to ring the changes on that tragic story.

Bidding one of the men keep watch over Farrar, Keenan hastened back to the cabin, after his horse and help to construct a litter on which the wounded man might be taken to town; but his return was delayed by the earnest appeal which Fenn Terry was making just as he reached the spot.

"All I ask of you, friends, is a little grace, a little patience, a few hours or even days of silence," the mine-owner was saying, his voice very earnest, his face betraying the strong emotions which his will was holding in partial subjection. "Even if the poor fellow was all those infernally-manufactured proofs would seem to show—which I flatly deny! Even if Social Sam was a member of that vile gang which has been a curse to this region for more months than we ought to number without feeling our cheeks fairly blister with shame! Even so—will you make another suffer for his crimes?"

"Some of you saw her—the poor girl I mean, gentlemen. She came here expecting to meet a loving, living brother. She found—what lies in yonder! The shock almost killed her. For all I know, or you can say, it may have killed her in fact! But if not, how can she rally if you double that shock by howling in her ears that the brother she loved was—"

"I'll not say it, gentlemen!" his voice quiver-

ing with poorly-suppressed passion. "I'll brand the lips of every man who does say it, as the lips of a liar and a cowardly curl!"

"Gently, Mr. Terry," quietly interposed Dr. Kemper, stepping forward a pace the better to arrest the attention of the excited man. "By making use of such harsh terms, you are only injuring your own cause, not helping along the ends you wish to gain."

"Do you say it, David Kemper?"

"I simply say this much, Mr. Terry: I performed what I believed was my duty. This done, I am done, as well. But I'll run the risk of being thought cowed by your threats, and add so much:

"I'll never charge yonder dead man with being aught, evil or good, unless I am brought to the witness-box to tell the whole truth. And if my word has any influence with our friends, here, they will promise to be equally forbearing, at least until the young lady can be taken back to her friends or her family."

"That's pure white!" cried one of the crowd, and though there were a few dissenting murmurs among those who cared more for a sensation than they did for the feelings of strangers, no one openly opposed the earnest plea made by Fenn Terry.

Seemingly grateful for the aid lent him by the doctor, Terry insisted on shaking hands with Kemper, but all who watched the two men must have realized that it was, after all, but a hollow sort of truce.

It was Kemper who proposed making a horse-litter on which to bear the body of Social Sam to New Dorado, where it could be properly cared for until the time came for burial. Though no one alluded to the fact, all seemed to take it for granted that there must be another and more formal investigation made before the clay was returned to its mother earth.

There were plenty of willing hands to do the work of shaping the litter, using knives in lack of an ax or hatchets, and Dr. Kemper drew Terry a little apart from the rest, in order, as it seemed, to tell him how Tol Farrar attempted murder and fared the worse himself.

"He barked the fellow who calls himself the Sharp from Snap City, but he said he intended to kill the other man. Did you notice him? A tall, stoop-shouldered, spider-legged knave."

"I didn't notice—I couldn't think of anything but—but poor Mather," muttered Terry, catching himself as though he had been on the point of giving another name.

"Farrar called him *Spider-web*," added Kemper, closely, if covertly, watching the pale face of his companion. "If so, his real name is *Webb Tennant*, one of the keenest detectives belonging to Cook's Rocky Mountain Detective Association. And—they say *Spider-web* never leaves a trail until he's bagged his game."

"Curse him!" almost viciously grated Terry, his face flushing and hands clinching involuntarily. "I'll choke the bloodhound off if he dares trouble—"

The sentence ended in a sort of growl, and something of ugly suspicion shot into his eyes as he observed that steady gaze.

"You have no cause to fear him, surely!" softly uttered Kemper, a curious smile twitching his long mustaches.

"Of course not, but—I was thinking of Miss Mather."

With that the mine-owner turned abruptly away, passing over to where the men were fashioning the horse-litter.

Dr. Kemper laughed softly to himself as he watched the other for a short time. Then he went back to where Tol Farrar was lying, awaiting the conveyance which was to take him back to New Dorado.

If Dr. Kemper thought to learn more from those lips concerning Webb Tennant, he was doomed to disappointment. Farrar lay in a heavy stupor, and the face of his physician looked grave enough as Keenan came over to read the verdict.

"There's a fair chance, I think, if we can control the fever which is sure to follow," said Kemper, in guarded tones, as they moved away from where the rough was lying. "He has the constitution of an ox, and all the bad whisky he's punished hasn't done much toward weakening it. We'll keep hoping for the best, Keenan."

Many hands make quick work, and there was still light enough for those who led the two horse-litters to pick out the easiest and smoothest trail to the stage road. After that progress was easier and more rapid, early evening bringing them to New Dorado.

Tol Farrar was taken direct to a hotel, where he was to remain until John Keenan could prepare a place for him above his saloon, where he could give his friend personal attendance as long as needed.

The body of Social Sam was also taken to the principal hotel, where a chamber was engaged for it by Fenn Terry, whose word was little less than law and gospel in New Dorado; judging by the deference shown his wishes by the landlord when such a gawsome guest was offered him.

Locking the door and taking the key with him, Terry hastened down-stairs, his anxious

face lighting up as he found Dr. Kemper awaiting his return.

"I hardly dared hope as much, but—you'll go with me, doctor?"

"I waited to ask you that same question, though couched in a different key," smiled the doctor. "From what I saw in passing the stage I imagine the lady will require medical attention, and the sooner the better. Still, if you prefer another physician, don't be bashful about intimating as much."

"I prefer you, of course," taking his arm and hurrying to the street, turning in the direction of his own house. "Only I was afraid you would think your first duty lay with Tol Farrar."

"He'll be all the better able to stand an examination after a few hour's rest," was the brief response.

Neither man seemed anxious to talk. Indeed, each one acted as if it was necessary to keep on guard against the other, and let the cause be what it might, ugly suspicions plainly troubled both men.

The house was reached, and even before Terry could touch the knob to open the door, Mrs. King flung it wide and greeted them with almost hysterical eagerness.

"How is—the lady, mother?" asked Terry, his face shining white and full of intense anxiety as Kemper closely watched it.

"Sleeping, or—oh, step-son, it looks so awfully like death that I haven't drawn a free breath since— Oh, dear!" gasped the woman, clutching his arm, as though she must fall without its support.

Terry shook her off, almost roughly, leading the way up-stairs to a chamber where May Mather was lying on a bed. She never moved, and for a single instant even the doctor felt that death had come before him.

But he quickly changed his mind, and after watching the poor girl for a few minutes, prepared some medicine, which he bade Terry administer according to directions, but not to arouse the patient under any consideration.

"It is a natural sleep, though it seems so death-like, and is the very best medicine she could have," he said, quietly, preparing to take his departure. "I'll call around early in the morning, unless you send for me earlier, which I see no reason to anticipate."

After a few words more he left the house, and Terry bade his step-mother resume her office of nurse until other arrangements could be made.

"But, who is she, Fenn?"

"A poor, helpless, innocent child, who never needed true friends more than she does this hour, mother," was his grave response; and with that Mrs. King was forced to be content for the present.

Mrs. King returned to May Mather, and Fenn Terry passed into the cozy little room which he used as a home office. He closed and locked the door behind him, then took from a secret drawer in his desk, a pocket album, opening it as he sat at the table beneath the droplight.

The album contained nearly a score photographs, and from each one of the cards a charming face looked forth—the face of May Mather, in every instance!

"Here—beneath my own roof at last!" he muttered, softly, his dark face lighting up, his eyes glowing. "Never to leave it again unless as my wife!"

CHAPTER XIII.

SANDY SANDS PICKING UP THREADS.

THE Sharp from Snap City did not wait for Webb Tennant to make any response to that rather enigmatical expression of his, but took the down grade to New Dorado with a will that tasked even those spider-like legs to keep pace with him.

After all, the detective was just as well satisfied to maintain silence, for his brain had ample food for thought.

He had at last found the game for which he had sought so long and eagerly, even fiercely. Found it, only to find death had claimed the prize before him!

Then there was that curious, more than half-forced bargain by which he had lost the temporary use of his tongue. What was the dead man to Sandy Sands? What connection was there between this cool sport and that young lady? Why was he willing to risk such an amount of good money just to save her from hearing the blunt truth?

And then—that ugly affair with Tol Farrar!

On his part, Sandy Sands seemed only thinking of reaching town as quickly as possible, and having no questions to answer apparently suited his book to perfection.

Entering the town, the Sharp passed through it in one direction, then made several cross-turns, using his eyes instead of his tongue, finally coming to a halt in front of the Mansion House, which appeared to be the best appointed hotel in the bustling little place.

"If you're famishing for grub, pardner, just pull out and skirmish around on your own hook," he said, glancing back in the direction of the hills from whence they had come. "As for me, I've a curiosity to watch the procession enter town."

"I'm not starving," was the quiet reply. "And, if it's all the same to you, Mr. Sands, I'll stay with you until you've decided just what you want to do with the man you've bought for two weeks."

"Lock you up in a glass case, maybe."

"Label it 'hands off,' then, please," with a low, grim laugh as his memory went back to the venomous glance given him by Tol Farrar.

Lounging about easily, taking care not to arouse curiosity by betraying their purpose in waiting there, the two men lingered near until the little cortege came winding down the steep grade, bearing the living and the dead back to town.

Both litters paused in front of the Mansion House, thus proving the shrewdness of Sandy Sands as a guesser, and though he by no means thrust himself forward on that occasion, both he and Tennant saw and heard all that transpired.

While the bodies were being taken up stairs, the dead and the wounded, the gray-eyed sport engaged rooms for the night and registered for himself and companion, giving the name of the latter John Brown.

The ink was still wet on the page when Dr. Kemper came down from the room to which Tol Farrar had been taken, and without noticing those present, he went up to the desk where the landlord now was, saying:

"It's only a temporary arrangement, you understand, Perkins, so far as the injured man is concerned. Keenan is making preparations for removing him to his own place, and you'll hardly be incommoded longer than this one night."

The landlord made some response, but Sandy Sands did not linger to catch his words. For reasons of his own he preferred the outside air just at that moment, and sought it at once.

But Dr. Kemper owned a pair of very keen eyes, and the glimpse he caught of a vanishing figure brought his heavy brows closer together for an instant. He turned quickly to the open register, and there read the name and title which the cool sport had given him back in the hills.

"Have you given him a room, Perkins?"

"Just registered—yes, sir. Sportish-looking chap, but thoroughbred face. One of the good old sort, I should imagine."

"Then 'twill do him no particular injury if you keep one eye on the gentleman, Perkins."

"You don't mean that—"

But Fenn Terry was entering the large room, and Kemper was moving off to join him, the two gentlemen quickly leaving the hotel and hastening toward the Terry place.

Rapidly as they moved, Sandy Sands kept track of them, yet governing his own movements so that even if noticed by others, no suspicion would be awakened that he was in fact shadowing the couple in advance.

The sharp lingered a bit as he saw them turn into the fairly large front yard and pass up to the veranda which extended along the front of the large, well-kept frame building; and as the door opened, he not only caught a glimpse of Mrs. King's fat face, but heard her hysterical ejaculations before the door closed again.

"That settles it!" he muttered to himself, running an approving eye over the building, his gaze settling for a time on a pair of curtained windows in the second story, through which shone a subdued light as from a night lamp. "Not so bad, after all! If it doesn't turn out to be more of a trap than a kindly refuge, though!"

He watched the windows until he caught sight of dimly outlined shadows moving in the room, then turned away with just the ghost of a sigh crossing his lips.

Once having turned his back on the place, Sandy Sands moved rapidly enough, keeping his eyes quite as busy as his legs, acting for a little while as though he more than half expected to detect a spy on his track; but if so, he was agreeably disappointed.

Turning aside to where stood a patch of tall weeds, mingling with scrubby bushes, Sandy Sands crouched down under cover, striking a match and shielding its bright glow with a curved palm, the better to cast its yellow rays over an object which he took from his breast.

This was the card-sized photograph which had so mysteriously disappeared from the bosom of Social Sam, back at the deserted cabin.

"Her face, sure enough!" muttered Sands, as he recognized the fair counterfeit. "I thought I couldn't be mistaken, though I only caught a glimpse of it, back yonder, when I fooled Spider-web with the palming act. And I reckon the letter goes with it."

He lit another match and hastily glanced at the letter, which was without an envelope. He turned to the end, and read the signature: "May Mather," and just above it the words: "Your loving sister."

A short, hard laugh parted his lips as he dropped the burnt match and rose to his feet, slipping the letter and picture back into his breast-pocket.

"Your loving sister!" That's all right enough, but I'm trying to hope that Miss May Mather will pan out a little bit purer stuff than her brother Sam has shown himself!

With that rather cynical observation, Sandy Sands apparently dropped that part of his even-

ing's work, striding briskly along until once more at the hotel where he had registered.

As he entered, he saw Webb Tennant doubled up in a chair that was tipped back against the wall in one corner of the office, and caught a bright, inquiring glance from the keen eyes under the slouched hat. He made a slight gesture which indicated patience, but passed through the room without speaking.

With the cool assurance of one who feels perfectly at home wherever capricious fortune took a fancy to drop him, the Snap City Sharp ascended the steep flight of stairs, softly humming a tune to himself. He paused on the landing, feeling in his pocket as if searching for the key which he had never claimed at the desk below, using both his eyes and his ears.

They stood him in good stead, for with a grim nod of his head, he lightly stepped along to the door of a chamber through the keyhole of which he caught the dim glow of a lamp or candle. And as he went over to peer through this friendly aperture, both organs served him again.

A muffled sound that seemed almost as much a curse as a groan, met his ears, and he could catch a glimpse of a bed on which a human form was lying.

A gentle test proved that the door was not locked, and schooling his mobile features to show only a grave solicitude, Sandy Sands entered the chamber assigned to Tol Farrar.

"Oh, Doc! can't you give me something to— You?" breaking short off and lifting his head with an angry, yet scared expression on his face as he recognized the intruder.

"Easy, dear fellow," soothingly murmured the Sharp, a gentle hand pressing the wounded man's head back upon its pillow. "I've just come in to ask if I can't do something to help you through."

"I don't— Curse you!" with fierce energy, though his voice was still weak and husky. "Haven't you done enough already? Haven't you crippled me, an' riddled me, an'—"

"Don't agitate yourself, I beg of you, pardner," urged Sands, his handsome face really full of pity and coaxing combined. "You yourself declared it was all a mistake, and I regret my part in it quite as much as anybody else can."

"I know—I wanted him—that cursed blood-sucker!"

"He's in town, and if it'll make you rest any easier, pardner, I'll agree to keep him here until you're strong enough to have it out with the fellow, on equal terms," quietly said Sands; but adding: "That is, of course, if you'll play as white with me."

"It's a trap he's set, an' you're helpin' him spring it onto me!" suspiciously muttered Farrar, but with a little less rancor. "Didn't I see you together, both times? Don't I know you're jards, workin' in couples?"

"You did see us together, I admit, but each time I was threatening to fill him chuck full of lead. You was close enough the first time to hear something of what I told him. I knew where you were, but I sent him just the opposite direction. Does that look as though I wanted him to down you, pardner?"

There was so much seeming truth in this that even Farrar was softened, and a look of doubting curiosity began to chase that ugly glow from his eyes. He had rallied wonderfully from the shock of his wounds, and such movements as he ventured, were made with an ease and freedom from pain as to astonish even the Sharp, used to marvels though he was.

"What is it you want, then?" slowly demanded Farrar.

"First, to assure you that I'm mighty sorry for my part of that double mistake, back yonder. I felt your sting, and only thought of getting back at the one who tried to down me."

"I meant him!" muttered Farrar, shifting his position uneasily. "I hed him kivered, dead, but jest then—I didn't notice it afore—they was a durned wasp nest hangin' to the bresh, an' one of 'em socked me jest as I went to pull trigger. An' so—"

"It was a bungle, all 'round, and as I said before, I'm mighty sorry for my part in it. For, pardner, you're just the sort of man I've been looking for this many a long day!"

"I never—what fer?" huskily mumbled Farrar, shrinking back a bit, that ugly, hunted expression coming back to his haggard face again.

"There's a heap of money in it for the right sort of man," half-musingly added Sands, apparently without noticing that move. "And if you're open to business, Farrar, I'll guarantee you better pay than you ever made in your life before, counting the time and trouble it'll cost you."

"I don't— What're you driving at, anyway?"

"How much will you take to put me on the track of Captain Kidd?" asked the Sharp, leaning forward, one hand gently grasping the wounded man's sound arm, his gray eyes keenly reading each change in that pale, frightened face.

Tol Farrar's lips parted and a husky, gasping sound issued from them, but nothing more. He was too frightened to speak, and it seemed as though he was on the point of swooning away.

"You're the man I've been looking for, or

your face tells lies!" added Sands quickly, his eyes all aglow. "How much, Tol Farrar?"

Instead of words, a hoarse cry came from the wounded wretch.

CHAPTER XIV.

TWO SIDES TO A SHIELD.

SANDY SANDS knew now that his suspicions were based on fact, and open admission could not have strengthened his belief that in Tol Farrar he beheld one of Captain Kidd's notorious "Billy-goats."

It seemed an easy matter to wrest a full confession from those lips, so weakened was the fellow by his injuries; but before the Sharp could press the advantage he had won, his keen ears caught the sound of footfalls on the stairs, and instinct warned him that his chance was lost.

"Mum's the word, pardner!" he hurriedly muttered as those hasty steps drew nearer. "I'm on the cross as well as you, and—"

The chamber door swung open and Dr. Kemper stopped short with one foot across the threshold, a dark frown coming into his face as he recognized the man standing at ease by the bedside of his patient.

"Evening, doctor," bowed the Sharp, smiling blandly as he nodded to the new-comer. "Just dropped in—"

"What are you doing here, sir?" harshly interrupted Kemper, flashing an angry glance from that careless figure to the flushed, frightened face on the pillow, then back again. "You've been exciting my patient too much for his own good."

"He'll tell you I've done him good instead of harm—if he tells you anything, doctor," quickly said Sands, touching the hand of the injured man, giving it a slight but warning pressure. "And I tell you, what I told him: I want to make what amends lies in my power for this unfortunate mistake."

"The mistake I'm objecting to is your coming here at all, and I'll take precautions to guard against its ever happening again," curtly uttered Kemper, fully entering the chamber and waving a hand toward the open door. "Oblige me by taking your departure, Mr. Sands."

"Shall I escort the unbidden guest, doctor?" asked a clear, cool voice from just without the door, and John Keenan, whose approach had been so easy that neither man had noticed it until he spoke, showed his handsome face and compact figure at the opening.

"No ceremony, I beg of you, gentlemen," blandly protested Sandy Sands, smiling gently from face to face. "I was reared an orphan, and used to wait on myself from early childhood. In fact, to be plain, I can't help kicking when any person even offers to assist me."

"Let him go, Keenan," said Kemper, though that suspicious frown still lingered in his strong face. "I dare say he means no harm."

"Thanks—so much!" bowed Sands, moving toward the door, his broad shoulders barring Keenan out as he turned to add: "I'll wait in the office, below, doctor, in case you should require my assistance in setting that arm or dressing that body wound. And—of course I'll settle all bills until Farrar is able to rustle for himself."

"Time enough to talk of that when I hand in my bill, Mr. Sands," was the curt response. "Oblige me by making way for Mr. Keenan. As a personal friend of the patient's, he has the best right to lend a helping hand in case of need."

"All right. No harm in making the offer, though."

Whistling softly, Sandy Sands turned away from the door, passing to the head of the stairs and beginning the descent, just as another man took the first step upward. That man was Fenn Terry, but neither spoke as they brushed past. If Terry recognized the other, his dark, troubled face surely did not betray that fact.

Sands found Tennant still doubled up in his chair, and called out:

"Have a weed, pardner? Then we'll go look up our man."

Perkins supplied the cigars, and lighting them, the two men joined arms and passed out of the hotel, strolling leisurely up the street.

"Forgot anything?" asked Tennant, as Sands abruptly wheeled and retraced his steps toward the hotel.

"I don't know how. Never forgot anything in my life. Don't pay," drawled Sands, calmly puffing away at his cigar. "Miserable weed! Four-thirds cabbage, and the rest stink-weed!"

They passed the hotel, only to make another turn when but a few rods below its location.

The street was reasonably dark, though the sky was clear and the moon beginning to shed its light over that portion of the globe. The only artificial light close by came through the open door and windows of the hotel, and from the rather smoky glass casing of the oil lamp hanging from the edge of the piazza roof.

Thus there was little danger of their movements attracting particular notice. Even if seen, their leisurely movements, their lazy smoking, would infer a quiet stroll to settle their supper; which, in passing, neither man had as yet enjoyed.

"What for?" asked Tennant, as Sands made yet another turn at the upper end of his beat.

"Nothing extraordinary. Made a bet with myself, and want to find out which hand has to pay the other."

"Secret?"

The Sharp from Snap City laughed softly, as though amused by that crisp curiosity. But he answered promptly enough:

"Not from a good and faithful pard like you, Spider. And yet— How are your nerves?"

"Suppose you test them?"

"What if I were to assert that Captain Kidd is in the hotel this very minute?"

"I don't think that would astonish me so terribly that I couldn't survive the shock," was the dry response.

Sandy Sands stopped short, bending around to gain a squarer look into that gaunt visage; and what he read therein seemed to surprise him, judging from the low whistle that issued from his pursed-up lips.

"Then you think—what, Spider?"

The answer was not nearly so prompt in coming as had been the previous ones, and Tennant lifted his free arm, pinching his thin lips between a bony thumb and finger as they walked slowly on.

"Take your time, Miss Lucy!" softly hummed the Sharp, placidly glancing through the open door of the hotel as they passed. "I was born without curiosity, and weaned on patience. That's why they decided to give me a masculine name and fit me out in trousers and other habiliments that tells the passer-by a boy isn't a girl. Narrow escape, wasn't it? For, only for that, you'd lack a pardner in this jolly little constitutional; wouldn't be proper, you know—and all that!"

"You met the man they call Fenn Terry, didn't you, on the stairs?"

"I believe I did. Met some sort of human being, at any rate."

"I was waiting for you in the office when he came in, but though he glanced in my direction, I don't believe he recognized me, then," added Tennant, in low, guarded tones as they once more drew near the front of the hotel. "He went to the desk, and looked at the register. I saw him scowl, and I heard him mutter something that would hardly pass for orthodox in the pulpit. And as he turned away, he looked at me again. Maybe he saw I was watching him, for if looks could have killed, you would hardly have found me alive when you came in."

"And you really think Mr. Terry is the Papa goat?" asked Sands, once more twisting his neck to catch a fair look into that face.

"If Captain Kidd really is under that roof—yes!" firmly declared the detective.

A low, rippling laugh came from the Sharp, and there was real or admirably assumed surprise in his tones as he asked:

"Are you really in earnest, Spider? Do you actually believe that Fenn Terry is Captain Kidd?"

"I don't go quite so far as that," was the grave response as they turned once more at the top of their beat. "I believe he knows more about the gang than an honest man has any right to know. But I should hardly have named him as Captain Kidd, only for your saying so decidedly that the road-agent chief was under that roof."

"I think I have good grounds for so asserting, though I may be in error, for all that. It's to settle the last faint doubts that I'm pacing this dusty quarter-deck so faithfully."

"Do you prefer to keep your reasons secret, Mr. Sands?"

"Tit for tat, eh?" laughed the Sharp, lightly. "An admirable motto under some circumstances. This may be one of those occasions, but you haven't proved it, as yet."

"You mean—what?"

"That you indirectly ask for my reasons, without first proving your good faith by divulging your own."

"I said that Fenn Terry was Captain Kidd, if Captain Kidd is to be found inside that building right now."

"And I said just as positively that he is *not* Captain Kidd. Which leaves us neck and neck, with you to move if you want to play the game to the end."

There was silence for several minutes. Webb Tennant seemed collecting his reasons, or it might be, was trying to decide whether or no he had ought to gain by putting his thoughts into plain speech.

His decision was in favor of open speech, and he began:

"I think you will understand what I mean, if you let your thoughts go back to what happened at the old cabin, this afternoon, Mr. Sands. For instance: don't you think Mr. Terry was just a bit too loud in his defense of Social Sam?"

"He admitted that he had called the dead man friend and partner."

"In words, yes. But did his actions match?" with just the ghost of a chuckle, dying almost as soon as born. "Who found the wig and beard that was hidden underneath the body?"

"The searching committee, of course."

"Fenn Terry was the first to propose turning the body over, though. But that is only one

item. From first to last, his manner was calculated to fire the crowd against Social Sam, instead of to soothe the hard feelings. And if he had not stirred up the others by his intemperate opposition, I doubt if one-half as much proof would have been found against the honesty of the dead man; or, if found, it would not have been published to the whole crowd!"

"There is something in that, but you must remember that Terry was fearfully excited. He really did not know just what harm he was doing to the poor devil whose good name he tried to save."

"If you look at it in that light, I've nothing more to say," the gaunt detective nodded. "Only—to me, it looked as though he knew but too well what he was saying and doing."

"Which simply proves that you've only glanced at one side of the shield, pardner," chuckled the Sharp, drawing Tennant over to the further side of the street, pausing in the deep shadow where they could look squarely into the hotel door. "You're positive that Terry is the big toad in the puddle, while I'm just as dead certain that— Wait a bit!" catching himself up when seemingly on the point of pronouncing another name.

"If you're wrong, and I'm on the right scent, Tol Farrar will come out of that door in less than half an hour, even though his removal insures his death before another sun rises!"

Webb Tennant said nothing in response to this speech, but contented himself with shrugging his shoulders. Then he settled them as comfortably as possible against the cold wall of the building against which they had taken their stand, and waited the result with a dogged patience learned in the course of long years of detective work.

Sandy Sands seemed confident that the test he proposed would bear him out in every respect, and placidly puffed away at his cigar, contented as though it had been the choicest of tobacco. Then—

"A quarter to spare, and here comes the procession!" he softly murmured, covering the coal of his weed with a hand lest its glow betray their espial to those unfriendly eyes; for John Keenan and Dr. Kemper were carrying Tol Farrar out of the hotel on a cot, with Terry bearing them company, holding a lighted lantern.

"There's two sides to the shield, pardner," softly breathed Sands. "And my side bears a pull-box rampant, with—"

"What!" ejaculated Tennant, incredulously. "You don't mean—"

"Dollars to cents that Doctor David Kemper is Captain Kidd!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE SPIDER ON HIS GUARD.

"I CAN'T make it come that way!"

Taken completely by surprise, as it seemed, Webb Tennant spoke louder than the Sharp thought prudent, and received almost a vicious twist of the wrist in reward.

"Button up, pardner!" the man from Snap City grated, barely loud enough for his companion to catch, as they stood watching the movements of the litter-bearers and lantern-carrier.

As it chanced, there were no other spectators at hand, for the landlord did not come further than the door to witness the departure of his guest, and from the rapid movements of Kemper and Keenan with their hastily improvised litter, it was easy to see that they hoped to finish that removal before a crowd could collect.

Fenn Terry showed the way, and they took the middle of the street, hastening along in the direction of Social Hall; but instead of keeping to the main street, which would bring them to the saloon by the front way, Terry turned aside with the light and picked a path across a vacant lot or two, finally pausing at the rear of the two-story building owned by Keenan.

In all this trip not a person was met, and only the two shadows appeared to note what was transpiring at the rear of Social Hall.

"Does it come any easier to you now, Spider?" half-mockingly whispered Sands, as they saw the bearers of the wounded man disappear through a rear door.

"Why should it? You heard what Keenan said back in the hills."

"And I heard what Kemper told the landlord, too; but that only helps clinch my belief that he's the party best worth watching. What was Tol Farrar taken to the hotel for? That Doc might have a handy place in which to carefully dress his body wound and set his broken arm? Just so! Then, why have they hustled Farrar out o' that in such a blessed hurry?"

"Possibly because Keenan got his quarters in readiness sooner than was expected."

"Certainly because Tol Farrar was too easily got at under the roof of a hotel," laughed the Sharp as he turned away from the spot, still locked arm-in-arm with the detective.

He proceeded to briefly describe his unceremonious call on the wounded member of the "Billy-goats," and how he was surprised by Dr. Kemper just as he was on the point of

wresting a confession from the frightened rough's lips.

"I managed to give him a hint to button up, right before Doc's eyes, but I reckon he must have let loose after I left. Or, it may be, the two K's put their heads together and decided that it was better Tol Farrar should run all the risks, rather than have it divided up among so many."

"What's the matter with Keenan? Your arguments point his way just as straight as they do toward the doctor."

"He makes another wire to work, no doubt, but I hardly think he's anything more important than a simple member of the gang."

There was a brief silence, broken by Tennant in low, dogged tones:

"I know one thing; and that's a string I can pick to the tune of a cool thousand checks!"

Sandy Sands laughed softly as he listened, making no effort to retain the arm which the gaunt detective slipped away by a swift motion.

"I've been waiting for that, Spider, ever since we came out for a romantic stroll 'neath the twinkling stars and silver moon. It's terribly hard to choke you off, even when you've got a healthy mouthful."

"If by that you mean the money you forced me to take, Mr. Sands, back in the hills, I accepted it simply as a sort of safeguard against your playing me any trick where you had so much elbow-room. Now the body of the man I've hunted for so long is safe in town, here's your notes: take them back!"

Tennant produced the roll, but Sands coolly waved it away.

"Put it up, Spider. Hang on to it until I ask you to shell out. I have no particular need of the ducats now, and 'twill save me the trouble of watching you all the time."

"Careful, Mr. Sands!" sternly muttered the detective. "There's such a thing as crossing the dead line, and you're getting perilously near the danger-mark right now!"

The Sharp chuckled again as he pushed back the extended hand without accepting the money offered. Changing sides, he locked arms despite that uncertain recoil, saying lightly:

"Don't be a fool, pardner! In milder terms, don't let your stomach upset your head. You haven't had your supper, and men of your build can't go without ballast in the middle; the lack of it makes 'em too cranky for any sort o' use."

"But this money—"

"Put it back where you pulled it from, and we'll fly a flag of truce until after supper. Then—well, I reckon a little powwow in private will be in order."

Though he seemed reluctant to postpone the matter, Webb Tennant complied, and Sandy Sands once more led the way back toward the hotel.

He seemed entirely at his ease, even if he was not quietly enjoying the uncomfortable box in which the famous detective found himself.

"If we had more time to spare, Spider, I'd gently remind you that I bought you, out yonder, for a term of two long weeks," he placidly observed as they walked through the dusk. "And if I had to do it, I might even recall the fact that there was a witness to that little business transaction: Tol Farrar, you understand?"

But Webb Tennant maintained a dogged silence. He acted like a man who was on his guard against a real or imaginary danger, who was not to be lured into a trap through too free speech. He would neither deny nor admit, and seeing this, Sands let the matter drop for the present.

Indeed, there was hardly time for them to come to a complete understanding, just then, unless they continued their walk beyond the Mansion House, for the smoky lamp over the entrance was now in fair view.

"It's a little late for supper, but I reckon we can make the rifle if we put on a bold front," laughed the Sharp, as he dropped the detective's arm at the foot of the steps leading to the veranda. "Kicking belongs to the profession, and we'll make mine host happy by giving him a chance to play mule."

But Sands did Landlord Perkins an injustice in this, for he at once complied with their request for supper, though the usual hour was long since past. Placing a substantial meal before them, he quietly withdrew, leaving them in sole possession of the long dining-room.

He would have gleaned little of interest had he remained, however, for both guests ate like half-famished men, talking but in snatches, and even then mostly about the viands placed before them.

Their hunger appeased, the two men left the dining-room for the office, finding Perkins the only occupant, which might be accounted for by the fact that there appeared to be nothing like a bar kept in connection with the hotel.

"You look prosperous enough, landlord," said the Sharp, glancing around the office as he struck a match and waited for the sulphur to burn away before touching it to the cigar supplied at his request. "But do you find a temperance hotel just the thing? I never before ran up against one that seemed to flourish, and—"

"The old lady won't listen to it, major," said

Perkins, with an involuntary glance over a shoulder before adding in a whisper: "But I've got a few pints of— Eh?"

"For your particular friends, of course," lightly taking up that oily chuckle. "Couldn't we persuade you to consider us down on that list just for— Good enough!"

He caught up the flask with all the ardor of one who meets with a long-lost friend, and motioning back the dingy glasses which Perkins produced from the same mysterious receptacle behind his desk, the Sharp added:

"Neck to mouth fits mighty well, landlord, and I reckon Mr. Brown and yours truly can get away with the whole package. No objection to a quiet smoke and sip in the chambers?"

"Not a bit of it," was the hearty response, more than ever convinced that the new guest was—what he had told the doctor—a thoroughbred sport.

And when Sands begged for a box of his admirable cigars, paying for the supplies in good yellow gold, his conquest was complete. Perkins would never cause them trouble by watching their movements with too curious an eye!

Tennant took no part in this bit of hy-play, his gaunt visage as grave and gloomy as that of a professional mute; but he made no objection when Sandy Sands proposed that they take their traps, which Ajax Tipsytoo had faithfully delivered up to their rooms.

Perkins insisted on showing them their apartments, and himself lugged the two gripsacks up the steep stairs, Sandy Sands good-naturedly volunteering to convey the lamps.

"Wish I could stay with ye, gents, and prove I'm not trying to pizen ye out of a bottle," half-sighed Perkins, after the rooms had passed inspection and a lamp placed in each. "But I'm on duty night as well as day, just now—worse luck."

"Worse luck for us, at any rate," bowed the Sharp from Snap City, actually heaving a sigh of regret as he shook hands with the delighted landlord. "It isn't often that we poor devils run up against such a clever host, and— Good-night, pardner! Better luck before we leave for fresh pastures, I'm hoping!"

Sandy Sands stood in a listening attitude close to the door until his keen ears heard Perkins reach the foot of the stairs; then he turned toward Tennant, with a short laugh.

"Nothing like soft soap for smoothing over rough places, Spider! It's long odds either Terry, Keenan or Kemper warned the old fellow that I would stand considerable watching; but I'm betting dollars to pennies that of the quartette, he'd swear by me, after this."

"I'm not playing critic, Mr. Sands," was the short reply. "I would have left you to do your soft-soaping without a witness, only you hinted at a bit of talk in privacy, and I didn't know as you'd care to call at my chamber."

"Yet that's precisely what I propose doing, Spider," nodded the Sharp, unlocking his grip as it rested on the narrow bed. "I'll tell you my reasons after a bit."

He opened the valise, taking out a quarter box of cigars and a pocket-flask covered with alligator leather, laughing softly as he cast a humorous glance over his shoulder toward Tennant.

"Humbug is all right, when you think it pays for the waste of breath and wear and tear of acting; but when I can cheat the adversary without endangering my stomach or my nostrils, I'm going to do it. I'm not saying that the landlord meant to poison or suffocate us, but having tested one of his weeds, I thought it cheaper to buy wholesale and astonish him so badly that he wouldn't stop to ask questions."

Leaving the supplies procured of Perkins on the little washstand, and turning his lamp down low, Sandy Sands motioned Tennant to repair to his own chamber, locking both doors behind him as he followed after.

First listening intently at the thin board partition dividing the small chamber from one on the side, thus making fairly sure it was unoccupied, Sands spoke not with greater freedom:

"I preferred doing our little powwow in this room, Spider, because we'll only have to guard against eavesdropping on one side, while my chamber is doubly dangerous, being in the middle of the row instead of on one corner."

"If you think it is so risky, why talk at all?" coldly demanded the detective, still on his guard.

"Because I've took a notion that you can give me some information well worth the trouble of drawing it out," coolly laughed the Sharp.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SHARP SHOWS HIS HAND.

BEFORE further explaining himself, Sands removed the things from the little stand near the head of the bed, drawing it out so that one might find a seat on the edge of the bed, while his companion occupied the one wooden chair. He placed the lamp, cigars and flask on the stand, then settled down on the bed as he motioned Tennant to fill the other seat.

"Take it as easy as you can, pardner, but remember one thing: if you are very sleepy, you'll get to bed all the sooner for talking right along the chalk mark."

"Suppose I have nothing to say?" tartly asked Tennant.

"I'll furnish you with plenty of points, never fear. And to begin with—light a cigar and take a sup."

Tennant complied that far, but his gaunt features looked unusually stubborn as the Sharp watched him while this was being done.

Nevertheless, he had brought about that interview with the intention of gleaning certain information, and he was hardly a man to despair while a single chance of winning remained.

"Ready, Spider?" he asked, with a half-smile drawing tiny wrinkles about the corners of his gray eyes. "Then—what were you hunting Samuel Mather for?"

Though the detective had evidently nerved himself to meet almost any question, there was something in that low, smooth tone that caused him to give a slight start. His brows contracted as he realized that this was noted, and possibly that fact lent his voice a harsher note as he said, curtly:

"What business is that of yours? You know I was hunting him, but—what was Samuel Mather to you, anyway?"

Sandy Sands removed his hat, dropping it on the cover by his side, then leaned across the table, catching Tennant by one hand, separating a finger from its fellows, to rub it back and forth over a dent in his skull, just back of the top.

"Social Sam gave me that little token of good-fellowship, Spider," he said, quietly, then bringing the bony finger down to his breast as he added: "You can feel my heart beating, no doubt, but that isn't what I mean. Right where your finger rests, Spider, is another beauty-spot which I owe to the man you were trailing with a rope in your fist."

"You mean?" hesitated Tennant, keenly scanning the face opposite.

"I mean that no man ever had more cause to hate another than I had to hate the fellow whose corpse we saw up in that old shanty."

"Then—why were you so mighty careful to choke me off when I started in to prove him the assassin you now declare he was?"

"That's part of another story," said Sandy Sands, dropping the bony finger and resuming his easy attitude, though his face was still grave and his tones hard as he added: "Like you, I was on the track of the man known here as Social Sam. Like you, I hoped to find him living; but unlike you, I meant to leave him dead, without the benefit of judge or jury!"

"You look as though you meant it all, Mr. Sands," hesitated the detective, doubting by nature and doubly so through training. "And if Samuel Mather injured you as those scars would seem to show, I don't blame you for swearing vengeance against him. But—and that's a point I confess puzzles me clear through!" with a frown coming into his gaunt face. "But, if all this is Gospel, why did you kick so against my branding him as a road-agent?"

"You want the whole porker, I see, Spider," laughed the Sharp, his keen eyes half-closing as he peered upward through the rings of blue vapor. "Seems to me this powwow is all one-sided."

"You are under no compulsion to answer, Mr. Sands," a little stiffly answered the detective, drawing once more into his shell.

"Of course not. Lucky for your bump of curiosity, too!" smiled the sport, with a lazy wink. "Bit of a mule, in some respects, and something of an old maid in another; a little coaxing goes a mighty long way with yours truly! So—here comes the plump truth, Spider!"

With those words all flippancy vanished from face and voice and manner. Sandy Sands placed his half-consumed cigar on the edge of the stand, leaned forward to support his elbows on the same article of furniture, gazing steadily into the hard face opposite as he said:

"As I said, I have been hunting this Social Sam for nearly two years, though I was ignorant of his passing under that title. I knew him up in Montana, and for a time I liked him clean through, for he only showed me his clean side, at first. Then he jumped at an opening to make a good stake, and downed me—as he must have believed, for good and all. I'm not sure that he ever found out his mistake."

"Yet you say he passed under a different name? Doesn't his changing that, with a shifting of grounds, hint at some such suspicion?"

"That's not so certain. I had a goodly number of friends in those parts, and my sudden disappearance, with his flitting, set them afoot. I was found, more dead than alive, and though it was many months before I could even begin to tell my story—I was crazy for the left of the time, you see—they suspected the fellow and tried to find him. All of which I learned afterward, you understand."

Tennant nodded assent, and the Sharp continued:

"Long before I had strength to start, I took an oath to keep hunting until I found my man, and I never lost sight of that vow until—well, just before I met you as we both took the stage at Snap City. I struck that town without the ghost of an idea that I was so close to my game, or you can bet big money Social Sam would not have lived as long as he did; but my pocket

was growing light, and I found a lot of sports who fancied they knew something about poker. They did, but they had a heap sight more knowledge when I shook the dust of Snap City off my dainty brogans," with a short, amused laugh at the memory.

"You saw that young lady take the stage, of course? But maybe you don't know that she stopped over in Snap City for a day and night, and that I contrived to make her acquaintance; never mind just how, for that is immaterial."

"To boil it down, Spider-web, I tumbled over head and ears in love with the young lady before we finished supper—I saw her first at the table—and I don't mind telling you that I registered a mental oath that the day was not far distant when that very lady should share my name and fortune!"

Through all this the detective was keenly watching the speaker, with each passing minute growing more and more certain that, whatever might have been the case before, Sandy Sands was in sober earnest now.

"Well, imagine my fix when I found out that the lady was hunting up the very man I had sworn to kill! That Social Sam was my game, and Samuel Mather was her living brother! I saw it all when she showed me his photograph, together with a letter recently received from him."

"Now you know why I acted as I did at the cabin, Tennant. Now you can guess why I held you back when you would have denounced the dead man as a road-agent, one of Captain Kidd's gang. And now you can see how thoroughly I mean what I add: that to save the lady I love from being still further wounded, I'd kill not only you, but a dozen better men, if so many tried to trample her poor heart in the mire!"

Strong, resolute man though he was, Webb Tennant shrunk away from the speaker, and though Sands instantly resumed his old, careless manner when he caught that recoil, the ugly impression still remained.

"There, you have my little yarn, Spider-web," said the Sharp, as he lit a fresh cigar before adding: "Now I'm ready to listen to yours. Hand for hand, with all cards spread face up, pardner!"

The detective moistened his lips with brandy from the flask, then sat in silence for a few moments, seemingly trying to decide just where to begin his story, or, possibly, how much he dared leave out. At least this seemed to be the conclusion reached by Sands, for he coldly said:

"It's heap sight easier to tell the plain truth than to hatch a lie and sit in the threads as you go along, pardner! And I'm not afraid to stand up before a broadside of honest facts, Sabe, Spider?"

"If I preferred to keep the truth secret, I could do so easier than by telling you lies, Mr. Sands," was the crisp retort. "What I do tell you, you can credit or not, just as suits you best."

"All right. You talk and I'll judge. I'll call you down quick enough, if I have good cause to doubt your perfect accuracy," coolly drawled the Sharp from Snap City, but with a peculiar light in his eyes that meant more earnest than jest.

"The man we saw dead, up in the hills, was called Jay Christie when I first knew him," began Tennant, speaking in low but perfectly clear tones that, no more than his hard, bony visage, gave signs of emotion.

"I had little to do with him personally, though we met on several occasions when my business affairs permitted me to pay a flying visit to my sister: the youngest of the family, and the sole survivor with the exception of myself. That, as you may guess, made the ties of affection all the closer between us, though you would hardly take me for a man who knew much about love."

Sands mentally declared that he certainly would not, but was too politic to put that thought into plain speech.

"You can't always tell a good poker player by the way he crooks his elbow, Spider, and I've heard of more marvelous things than that. As you were about to say?"

"My sister was married. Her husband was fairly well off, and had more land than he knew well how to handle with ease or profit, so one day he sold a large tract, getting his own price, a very tidy figure it was, too, worse luck!"

"He lived quite a distance from the town in which he kept his money on deposit, and being very busy that day—which was Saturday—he very foolishly concluded to keep the cash in the house over Sunday."

"That very night he was brutally murdered for his money! And my poor sister, his wife, the only other being under the roof at that time as fate would have it, was badly wounded. No doubt the butcher thought he had quite finished her. If he had—well, I might have been a little longer in learning who the devil was, but I'd have ferreted him out before giving up the trail."

"The neighbors sent for me, but I was absent on duty, and did not receive the dispatch for a couple of days. When I got home my brother-in-law had been buried, and my sister was lying like one already dead."

She rallied for a bit when I came to her and

told me that before the murderer struck her down as she started up with a shriek at the horrible sound of—his first stroke shattered the skull of my brother-in-law," his tones faltering a bit, though he hurriedly added: "She distinctly saw and recognized the face and figure of Jay Christie, a young man whom they had loved and trusted like a younger brother!"

"Within the week my sister died. Not from her wounds, though they were severe enough. She might easily have rallied from them, had her heart been in it. But she didn't care to live after Henry—her husband. And his grave was opened to admit her body."

There was no trace of lightness or jesting in Sands's voice as he spoke a few words of consolation, for he was touched by that cold, grim, yet genuine grief. And there was genuine friendship in his grip as he clasped that bony hand while saying:

"I can't blame you for feeling devilish toward Jay Christie, pardner, but—is it so certain that my man is your man?"

"You saw that triangular scar on his temple, Mr. Sands. Is it likely that another man could have that, in the same place, with the same face, figure, hair and hands?"

Sandy Sands did not respond immediately, but sat like a statue on the edge of the bed, only rousing himself when Tennant gave a look of questioning surprise. Then he uttered a short laugh as he rose to his feet, a curious thrill in his voice as he spoke:

"Yet I could tell you of an incident just as extraordinary as that would be, and, rather oddly, too, it relates to the fellow they call Captain Kidd in these parts. Do you see this knife?" as he drew such a weapon from his bosom.

"Well, what I meant is—Take it, curse you!" he grated, almost savagely, as he sent the blade flashing through the lamplight.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SHARP AND THE SPIDER.

Not until those fierce words passed the Sharp's lips—not until he saw that glittering blade draw back, to flash forward even more swiftly, did Webb Tennant even dream that a blow was being aimed at his life.

With an ejaculation that had not time to become a cry, the gaunt detective flung himself backward in an instinctive attempt to escape what seemed almost certain death, the frail legs of his chair giving way and permitting him to fall amid the ruins. And even as he toppled over, he saw his mistake and realized that he was making an ass of himself!

Sandy Sands was not even looking toward him, and that polished blade had been put to a far different use to that which Tennant had imagined it would be.

While the detective was telling his story of Jay Christie and the atrocious crime for which he had sworn vengeance, the keen sense of hearing with which the Sharp was gifted warned him that he was not the only auditor Tennant had. And during that brief pause, he had, as he believed, accurately located the eavesdropper.

Making use of the name of the road-agent chief as being most likely to disarm the suspicions of the spy and hold him spellbound, eager to learn what remarkable incident the sport was about to illustrate with his knife, Sandy drew the weapon back, then hurled it with all the force of his muscular arm directly at the point where he believed the eavesdropper was crouching.

The keen point split through the dry board partition separating the two chambers, and an angry, half-smothered cry was followed by hurried, unguarded footsteps in the other room.

"Tickled him, by glory!" laughed the Sharp, pushing the stand out of his way and leaping over that tangle of legs, whole and broken, to turn the key and unlock the door.

He naturally expected the discomfited spy to attempt an escape by similar means, but even as he opened the door, his keen sense of hearing warned him of a different method. There was a squeaking sound as of an ill-fitting sash being lifted in haste, and with a warning cry to Webb Tennant, the Sharp sprung across the room to fling up a window on the same side of the building.

"Look out, pardner!" was that warning. "He's making a jump for it. See if you can spot his figure for future use!"

Swiftly as all this had taken place, it gave the detective ample time to recover both his wits and his perpendicular. He was at the window almost as soon as Sands, and both were quick enough to catch a glimpse of a dark figure just jumping to the ground from the one window of the room adjoining that in which they stood.

The spy fell heavily, but quickly recovered his footing, running directly away from the building toward a covert of small trees which would quickest shelter his flight, in his confusion forgetting that by so doing he was affording two enemies an admirable chance to drop him by a snap-shot or two by the clear light of the nearly full moon.

"Room—I can wing the devil!" harshly grated Webb Tennant, as he tried to cover the

fugitive; but in this the Sharp was ahead of him once more, quietly saying:

"Don't crowd, pardner; I've got him dead to rights!"

So it seemed, if steadiness of aim was all, but Tennant fairly shook with excitement and suspense as he saw the spy nearing that friendly covert, where the shadows would prevent all save random shots.

"Now—now!" he panted, to give a vicious oath as he saw the fellow plunge into the darkness without even one shot fired after him. "Curse it all! why didn't you give me room? I could have dropped him just as easy!"

The Sharp replaced his weapon, and dropped the sash, then lowered the green shade to cut off all view. He turned from the window, to bend his head in listening; but all was quiet about the hotel, and he knew that no alarm had been taken by landlord or his other guests.

"What was it you said just now, Spider?" he asked, easily, a smile growing as he glanced from the broken chair to the pale, angry face of his companion.

"I would have dropped him, only for you!"

"Or tried, which would have been just about as bad; and that's why I bothered you, Spider."

"What do you mean?" with an angry snarl underlying his words. "He must have heard all we said—he knows who I am, and what I'm in these parts after!"

"I reckon he did," with a slight nod, as he turned to the partition and worked his knife loose, then looked at its keen point while adding: "But I didn't spot the rascal until the worst was said, and then I knew we couldn't take or kill him without kicking up a holy rumpus that would have turned the hotel, and after it the town, all up on end. So— Well, I marked the rascal, anyway! We'll know him when we meet him, Spider!"

"I'd have made sure of him, only for you!" growled Tennant, his face showing how seriously he was worried over the escape of one who could tell his real name, his actual profession.

"So you said before, pardner," nodded Sands, resuming his former position on the edge of the bed and lighting a fresh cigar. "Take a seat if you can find one, Spider. Queer how you managed to break that chair down!"

The detective flushed a bit at that quizzical glance and tone, but offered no explanation where none was needed. Possibly that fact lent a deeper shade of surliness to his tones as he growled:

"We've done too much talking already. I've nothing more to say, and I don't care to listen to you any longer. Is that plain enough?"

"Good as a wink to a blind horse, Spider, but I never could take a hint when I had anything to gain by letting it alone. And just now—I'm going to talk, and you're going to listen, Mr. Tennant!"

"Don't try to crowd me too far!"

"No; just far enough," with a swift return of his old graceful ease as he added: "And now, having pushed you to the ragged edge, Spider, suppose you come down and meet a fellow on equal footing?"

"I've nothing further to tell you, so where's the use of wasting time and running the risk of being overheard by another cursed spy?"

"Lightning never strikes twice in the same place, I've heard, Spider, and it's hardly likely that Papa Goat detailed two of his kids to pipe us off, so soon."

"Then you think—"

"That our gentleman neighbor was one of the gang? If not, why not? If an honest man, would he have been listening at all? Or, if he had, would he have cleared out entirely without so much as a yelp to rouse the town?"

"It isn't too late for that, even yet."

"No. Yet I'm open to bet dollars against dimes that the fellow was just as anxious to get away without raising an alarm as I was to let him. Mind you, pardner," his voice lowering and growing a bit harder as their eyes met. "I'm not saying that I wouldn't have laid the knave out for cooling, if it could have been done without calling too close attention to us both."

"I could have done it, and explained all by his trying to rob me," growled Tennant, still chafing over that failure.

"And you might only have winged him. And he might have spit out part of what he learned through his ears, in yonder. And you ought to know how easy it is to raise a whirl big enough to send such a man as you, up a tree, Spider! For there's a good many rough rascals in these parts who'd be only too glad of a chance to lend a hand at such a raising: such an admirable chance to pay off old scores, Spider!"

Though greatly against his will, Webb Tennant was gradually becoming convinced that the Sharp from Snap City had acted all for the best when everything was taken into consideration; and having reached that point, he was honest enough to make the admission.

"That's white," nodded Sands, their hands joining across the stand. "Now we'll get down to sober business once more. You say that Social Sam was really Jay Christie? I knew him by still another name, but no doubt he had a pocketful to pick and choose from as occasion

demand. How long ago was it that he—that you first began hunting for him?"

"Four years ago next month."

"That was long before I met and made his acquaintance. If I had only known—but I didn't, unfortunately for us both. Well, Spider, your trail has come to an end; what is your next move?"

"To claim the reward offered for Jay Christie, and by proving his death, prove to the world that I have so far avenged the ones he brutally murdered."

"Four years?" musingly repeated Sands, then adding, more briskly: "Having waited so long, you can afford to wait a little longer, Spider. There will be no difficulty in getting the reward, I reckon, for that three-cornered scar will be proof enough, and there's no lack of witnesses as to his death. Then—"

His speech was cut short by Tennant taking a roll of bills from an inner pocket and placing it on the stand between them, saying:

"There's your money, Mr. Sands. I took it only to have some security against your playing me a trick with the body, out yonder. Now it is safe under this roof, and I can hold my own."

"Call that the reward, then, Tennant, and keep a still tongue for the length of time we bargained for up yonder. If you have gained your point, don't forget that mine still shivers in the wind."

"I'd rather not take it back, Sands," hesitated Tennant. "I've waited for my revenge so long, that I can't wait any longer! Poor as it is, compared with what I have been expecting, I must have that much!"

"So you shall, at the end of two weeks, if not sooner. I'll explain it all, pardner, if you'll have patience. But—put up the notes!"

"Why should I?"

"Well, if the old grounds won't serve, I'll give you others. I stopped long enough in Snap City to pretty well clean out the high-flyers I found ready to welcome an angel, as they thought me, first-off. I've got more wealth than any one man ought to carry about with him, let alone one who has gotten mixed up with the Billy-goats. Oblige me by stowing that away, pardner, and if anything should happen to me before you and I come to a settlement, just hand the bundle to Miss Mather."

"Why to her?" hesitated Tennant, keenly scanning that face.

"As my bride elect, for instance," with a short, soft laugh as a faint smile came into his face. "But I'm good for a century, yet, and I'll call on you for the money in good time, never fear. Stow it away, and I'll give you another ray of light, Spider."

Tennant took back the money, though with evident reluctance. The reasons offered by the Sharp seemed frivolous and far from sufficient. Though he could see no sure foundation for it, he suspected some sort of trap or snare underlying that urgency.

"I've told you why I wanted you to hold your hush about Social Sam, long enough for the young lady to rally from the shock, or to be taken out of the way of hearing and seeing the worst of it; but I've got another reason which may impress you a little more forcibly. That is this: I really believe that Captain Kidd killed the fellow, or had him killed by some of his Billy-goats!"

"So Terry tried to make out, but it's just as hard to believe now as it was then. Jay Christie must have known I was closing in on him, and to escape my grip, he blew his own brains out!"

"I don't think that, and I'll give you my reasons. Miss Mather had a rich relative. He died, leaving an enormous fortune to her and her brother, Samuel Mather, the two being joint-heirs. They were the only relatives who bore his name, though there were others only a little less close of kin to the cranky old fellow."

"May I ask how you learned all this?" ventured Tennant, his sparkling eyes betraying awakening interest in the matter.

"Partly through the newspapers, partly from Miss Mather herself."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SHARP TAKES AN ANGEL.

"You think I made good use of my time?" asked Sandy Sands, noting an amused smile which crept into the gaunt face beyond the little stand. "Well, it's a way I have of my own when anything interests me; but that don't count. And you want to hear why I mix Captain Kidd and his Billy-goats up with this little romance."

"First, bear in mind that nearly three million of dollars was left jointly to May and Samuel Mather, by their grandfather; that each heir was to have one-half of that amount, provided both were living when the testator died; that in case one of the heirs should be killed, or should die a natural death before marriage and having children, the one surviving was to come into the whole property; and that should both be so unfortunate, then the fortune was to be divided among their next of kin."

"A foolish, as well as dangerous sort of legacy!"

"You're right, Spider!" nodded Sands, gravely. "So dangerous that it has cost one life already, and almost drawn another into a snare to which death itself would be preferable!"

"What! you mean that—"

Sandy Sands placed a letter and a card photograph before the detective by way of partial answer, supplementing them with:

"You found these on Social Sam's body, and I managed to secure them. As you can see, the photograph is one of Miss May Mather. The letter is one which she wrote to her brother, telling him that she was about to start for this place, without waiting for his permission; why that had been withheld, doesn't matter just now."

"But where does Captain Kidd come in? If I was to guess, I'd say Mather himself!"

"And that he blew his brains out for fear his sister should find out his evil character?"

"Why else?"

"Then why did he take such pains to keep every proof of that evil character on his person? Why make sure of that discovery? Right there is the weak joint in your armor, Spider, while my way of looking at it closes up every crack and flaw!"

"I believe that Social Sam was one of the gang. I believe that he was wholly in the power of Captain Kidd, who in some way—probably by reading the papers—found out all about this cranky will. Social Sam may have heard of it; through the same agency, maybe. If so, he may have tried to shake the gang, to go and claim the fortune. Or he may have known nothing at all about it, and Captain Kidd himself did the letter writing; for Miss Mather told me she had word to direct her letters to Amos Duprez, at Snap City. Why so? Social Sam was known here by the name of Samuel Mather."

"It looks suspicious, the way you state the case," guardedly admitted Tennant, pinching his under lip as he seemed to weigh each point in regular order.

"So much so that I've determined to not only keep guard over the young lady, but to try my level best to run in Captain Kidd and his entire gang," was the crisp response. "I believe I can put my hand on at least half a dozen of them, counting in Tol Farrar and the two men who were with him when Social Sam was discovered, a corpse."

"You leave out Fenn Terry, then?"

"Because I don't really think he belongs to the gang, though time will tell which is right, you or me. Now—about that money, Spider. Will you consider that as wages, to be earned by helping me run down this outfit?"

There was no immediate response. Tennant stared at the split partition, though evidently not seeing the print left by that deftly cast weapon. And Sandy Sands began to frown long before an answer was ready for him. And even then it was hardly satisfactory.

"Give me until morning to weigh the matter, Mr. Sands," at length spoke the detective, lifting his eyes to that stern countenance. "I can hardly afford to spend more time out here, but—"

"All right; morning goes!" exclaimed the Sharp from Snap City, rising to his feet and putting on his hat. "Think it over, and try to see your way clear to accepting my offer. You're just the pard I need; your deliberation will balance my headlong git-thar-in-a-burry-tiveness, you see!"

With a smile and a laugh, the Sharp left the chamber, pausing a bit midway the long corridor, or passage between the double row of chambers. He seemed in doubt for a little while, but then turned toward the head of the stairs, passing down them and out from the hotel by the door which opened directly at the foot of the flight, thus avoiding the necessity of entering the office.

A seemingly careless glance around served to assure him that no person had noticed his departure from the hotel, though he smiled faintly the next moment at the precaution.

"What matter? As long as a man attends to his own business out here, he's free to come and go at his own sweet will. Still, it's some comfort to know that only one rascal was set to watching over us."

Even as those thoughts flitted through his busy brain, Sandy Sands gave a start that had in it a touch of surprise, for he saw a tall, dark figure coming out of the same door he had recently passed through, and as it drew nearer to where he stood, he recognized Webb Tennant.

If he had had time, or if there had been any sufficient cover near at hand, he would have acted on his first suspicion, lying low to watch and follow the detective in order to find out what had brought him forth so soon after their parting. But even as he thought of this and cast a keen glance around him, the detective pronounced his name in a low, guarded tone:

"Mr. Sands?"

"If I wasn't changed in the cradle—yes!"

"I don't wish to intrude upon you, if you have any particular business on hand, but—" with a curious hesitation in his tones that awakened curiosity afresh. "Well, I heard you go down stairs, and just thought I'd follow to ask if you needed any help?"

"You fancy I require a guardian, then, Spider?" softly laughed the Sharp, keenly watching that bony face.

"If you look at it in that light, Mr. Sands, I'll simply ask your pardon for following you, and go back to my room," stiffly bowed Tennant, his face showing a flush by the clear light of the moon.

"Not a bit of it, dear fellow," said Sands, slipping a hand through the detective's arm and drawing him further away from the hotel. "I only left you because I fancied you wanted to be alone, the better to weigh my last proposition. We'll walk and talk together."

"I do want time to consider it, sir, but I would like just a little more light on the subject, if not asking too much."

"Put a finger on the dull point, Spider, and maybe I can brighten it up a bit more," lightly nodded the Sharp.

"You are acting as guard to Miss Mather?"

"If so, she don't know it," was the crisp response.

"I thought— But maybe you are hired by her friends?"

"Not exactly hired, Spider, though I'm free to admit to you—in secrecy, mind—that I expect a rich reward in the end. A close friend of hers gave me the hint to keep an eye open, and another eye on her movements. I took that hint, and made it an oath when I saw the lady."

"Then you are playing the game single-handed?"

"I am, unless you'll chip in with me, Tennant. I'll be perfectly frank with you, and own that it promises to be a very tough fight. It may be that I'll have to kill, to keep from being killed. But if you will pard in with me, I believe we can not only make the rifle, but make enough besides for you to retire from the profession on."

"It's not the money I'm thinking of, but—" began Tennant, only to be interrupted by Sands.

"You hate to think of serving one who bears the same name as that of the dead man back yonder? Well, that hadn't ought to trouble you. I know, from what I've learned, partly from the papers, partly from her own lips, that brother and sister have been parted for more than half their lifetime."

"Well, I'll weigh it all over, and give you my decision in the morning," slowly uttered the detective, releasing his arm and turning back toward the hotel.

"He's a queer nut in some respects, and I begin to think he's at least partly cracked," mused Sands, watching the detective until his gaunt form was swallowed up by the shadows. "Yet, if he'll chip in, he and I ought to be able to make a mighty pretty fight of it, even against such odds!"

With that reflection passing through his mind, the Sharp turned and strode briskly away in the direction of the Terry mansion, guided as he drew nearer by that dim light in the upper story, marking the chamber in which May Mather was still locked in a death-like sleep.

All was quiet about the place, and though he lingered near for more than an hour, nothing rewarded his vigil. If Penn Terry was not already in bed and asleep, he evidently meant to pass the night outside.

"If I knew where Kemper hung out, I'd go take a squint at his premises, just for luck!" muttered Sands, turning toward the hotel once more. "Strange how men will differ! Now Tennant would almost make oath that Terry is the head goat, while I'd stake my last ducat on Spider."

Reaching the hotel, Sandy Sands entered the office, his throat feeling parched and feverish. He found Perkins dozing in his arm-chair, looking so miserably sleepy that he had not the heart to awaken him, especially as he saw a pitcher on the desk and a water bucket in the corner.

Drinking heartily, he filled the pitcher and took it up-stairs with him, in case his thirst should return.

He paused at the landing above, listening intently. Not a sound came to his ears, and the single oil-lamp just over his head did not give out too bright a light for his eyes to note that all seemed dark at the corner chamber assigned to Webb Tennant.

Tiptoeing along, he bent an eye to the key-hole. Slow, regular breathing came to his ears, and all was dark within, save where a tiny rift of moonlight crept in at an edge of the lowered curtain.

Satisfied that the detective was safe for the rest of the night, and that he really intended keeping faith, the Sharp passed along to his own chamber, unlocking it with the key he carried in his pocket.

All was as he had left it, the lamp burning low, standing between the untouched bottle and box of cigars. A faint smile flitted over his face as he noted them, and he murmured:

"I'll throw away a few weeds, and spill that poison in the morning. 'Twould break Perkins's heart to find them untouched, after all my soft-soap!"

The lamp in burning gave out an offensive odor, and as the window near the foot of his bed gave an unobstructed view of the clear sky, he extinguished the light after completing his

few preparations for rest. It could hardly be called "going to bed," since he merely removed his coat and vest, letting down his braces, besides removing his boots.

He placed the little stand near the bed, setting the water pitcher upon it, where he could find it without difficulty in case his thirst should return. Then, lying down, he began carefully revolving the events of the past few hours, trying to untangle the snarl, and see his way clear to a safe and happy goal.

He had so much to think over, his brain seemed so active and even restless, that he had no thoughts of going to sleep, believing that it would be a waste of time even to think of wooing the god of slumber.

And yet—just how long after, he had no means of knowing—he gave a slight start, staring blankly before him. He was barely conscious of a dull, heavy, throbbing pain about his temples, and at the same time something seemed to press with suffocating weight upon his chest, causing his lungs to labor with painful difficulty. And—what was that strange, sickening odor that filled the little chamber?

Chloroform!

CHAPTER XIX.

A GATHERING OF THE BILLY-GOATS.

A DARK figure passed hurriedly across a strip of moonshine, and was about to enter a narrow passage between two rugged masses of rock, when right ahead of him sounded a note of warning. To the uninitiated ear it might have been taken for the hasty scramble of a stray goat, frightened from its nap, for in addition to the rattle of loose stones there was a low, broken bleat.

The owner of that dark shape was no novice, for he instantly came to a halt, imitating the call with wonderful fidelity, then calling out in plain words:

"All right, Billy. Time presses, and we'll drop the rest for once."

"Strike a match and show your mug, then," came a guarded response from some invisible guardian of the narrow pass. "I reckon it's all right, but we ain't taking no long chances, boss."

With a low growl that might have been a curse at this dogged adherence to rules which he had taken a prominent part in framing, the new-comer drew a match across the rough rock, holding the flickering blaze before his face.

Little was to be seen save a mass of coarse black hair, out of the midst of which gleamed two eyes, showing almost red in that uncertain light. Just so might that sable disguise found with the corpse of Social Sam have made its original wearer look under like surroundings.

"All right, cap'n," with an apologetic echo. "I knowed you was in a hurry, but after what's come to pass o' late we didn't want to act too mighty brash. An' then—"

"That's all right, and I'm not kicking," was the bluff interruption. "Better too much than too little caution. Only, I was so late myself that I supposed all the others had gathered, and you'd take me on trust."

"That's one or two lackin', even yit, cap'n." "The deuce you say!" with more than impatience in his gruff voice. "If they've dared—let me see your face."

His eyesight must have been remarkably strong to have recognized one man from another in the gloom which enveloped them both; but to all seeming he did so, dropping a word of praise before passing on.

"If all were as prompt and faithful, pardner, we'd be heap sight better off! Well, keep an eye out for the sluggards, and if I need you, I'll send a word."

"All right, cap'n, with a mighty big thankee hitched onto it!" the gratified sentinel chuckled as Captain Kidd left him.

The pass was a short one, and a few long strides carried the chief of the Billy-goats into an open, level space, surrounded on all sides by towering rocks. To all seeming there was but one method of entering or leaving that miniature valley, and that narrow pass was guarded by an armed man, now doubly vigilant after those judicious words of praise.

Captain Kidd halted when fairly within the circular opening, and glanced quickly around over the dark shapes standing near, uttering a low growl of displeasure or suspicion as he counted them.

"There is one sluggard; who is he?"

The dark figures stirred restlessly, but no answer came until the chief sharply repeated his question. Then one man ventured to say:

"We don't know, captain. We've done no talking since coming here, waiting for your orders. You know the last rule which says—"

"My memory is good, and needs no refreshing," was the impatient interruption. "Keep your masks on. I'll take the grip. First that of the family, then follow with the individual sign. Ready!"

He silently passed around the party, clasping each mask by the hand, giving a low, ugly growl as he finished.

"Dan Dillon is the one lacking. Who can tell where he is?"

There was no answer, each masked figure

shaking its head as that fiery gaze rested upon it in passing along the line.

"I picked the best men, as I thought. I counted on each one. The secret sign told as much. All but Dillon has responded faithfully, and I thank you for so doing. As for Dan—if he has lost his nerve just because Tol Farrar was downed, I'll—"

He checked his angry speech for an instant, then added in low, merciless tones:

"Well, he'll never play cur twice!"

There was an uneasy stir among the others, and Captain Kidd altered his tone and manner. He knew he had said quite enough to impress on their minds the importance of punctual obedience to orders, and anything more would injure rather than help along his plans.

"It is not necessary to tell you, partners, that important business awaits us. The call you received told you that much. And the care I showed in making my selection is proof enough in itself. I only sent word to the pick of the family; men whom I felt I could trust even as I trusted myself."

Another stir, but this time one of gratified vanity. Whatever else he might lack, Captain Kidd certainly knew how to flatter, and by a few adroit words insure the best of service from his men.

"The most of you were present at the meeting last night, when the reward due a traitor was measured out to him. The punishment was more richly deserved than even I knew, at the time, though what I had discovered was sufficient to seal his fate a score times over, had the treacherous dog so many lives to pay!"

"Still, if I could have looked ahead for a few hours—if I could have guessed at what was even then coming upon us I would have acted far differently. Social Sam would have suffered the penalty, just the same, but after another fashion. He had to die, or our organization might as well have thrown up its charter, off-hand!"

"The only charges I brought against him, last night, were of breaking his oath to share equally with the family, and proving himself a traitor by refusing to obey orders, and attempting flight. If that meeting was to be held over again, I could add still uglier charges."

"Social Sam is out of our reach, now, but I'll show his recent partners part of his crimes, not particularly as a warning, but that the record may be complete, and you at least begin to realize the great peril one treacherous cur can throw us all into."

"Social Sam was really Samuel Mather, as he told us, but of his past life we knew nothing—I knew nothing, until I stumbled across the truth by pure accident."

"His family back East was very rich, and nearly a year ago there was a large fortune left to Sam and his sister. No one seemed to know where Sam was, or whether he was still in the land of the living. The last heard from him was far out in the mountains."

"As the surest method of finding him, in case he was still alive, the story of the fortune, the terms of the will, with as perfect a description of the missing man as could be given by those who had not seen him since he was a lad; all this, with paid advertisements, appeared in many of the more widely circulated papers."

"One of these fell in my way, and I quietly set about investigating the truth of what I read. I satisfied myself that there was something in it well worth cultivating, and to test Social Sam, I managed to drop one of the papers in his way. If he was square, of course he would have a meeting called, and let the family into his precious secret."

"Instead of that, he went on a tear, and when the liquor set his brain to whirling, he let part of his purpose leak out. You know what followed."

Captain Kidd ceased speaking for a little, but none of his men ventured to make any comments. They felt that he had not told all he had to communicate, and patiently waited for the end.

"But this breach of faith was not all. It meant cheating his sworn comrades. It meant disobedience of orders. It included armed resistance to those who were deputized to enforce ten-fold worse."

"Before completing his arrangements for breaking away from his oath-bound allegiance, Sam Mather prepared a deadly trap for his comrades. He sent word to—whom?" his voice, low and deep, but full of the fiercest hatred. "To the deadliest bloodhound ever set on the track of mortal man! To Webb Tennant, alias Spider-web!"

An ugly, menacing muttering broke from those masked lips, but still the men waited for the proper time in which to speak out clearly.

"That bloodhound was on the stage when Tol Farrar halted it for the purpose of carrying the corpse to town. He was expecting to meet Social Sam here, and he met him at the old shack instead. Met him, but found the traitorous lips sealed in death!"

"An ordinary man would have dropped the case at such a balk, but Spider-web isn't built that way! He identified Sam, by the scar on his face, and after smelling out what he could at

the old shack, he came on to Dorado. What for? To trail down and bag each one of the men marked out for him by Social Sam!

"We know who he is, now," spoke up one of the masks. "Why not get in the first blow?"

"We will!" was the coldly fierce response. "But there's another man to deal with besides Tennant, and I'm not so sure that *he* isn't the more dangerous of the pair: the sport who calls himself Sandy Sands."

"I've heard of him, and saw him once, in Snap City," volunteered another of the masked men. "He's a sport, ready to play any sort of game, with any comer. What's the matter with picking up a row over the cards and shooting him?"

"Will you volunteer?"

"If no better man offers to take the job—yes!"

Captain Kidd laughed, softly. He seemed pleased by such grim readiness, even while he doubted its wisdom.

"You'd get there on top, if any man could, partner; but they are both mighty tough nuts to crack, and we want to make a clean sweep when we begin. Then—if we can get them out of the way without showing our hands, so much the better."

"I only made the suggestion."

"We'll act on it, too, if other means fail."

"Is the girl bunched with the others, cap'n?" ventured one of the outlaws, after a brief pause.

The chief gave a start at that question, and his answer was delayed a little, as though he found it hard to pick just the right words. But when he did speak, it was plainly enough.

"Hardly! I left the lady out of my story at first, but she has a very important part to play, and maybe I might as well let you into the whole secret right now, though time presses."

"The fortune I spoke about, was to fall equally to brother and sister. In case one died, his or her share was to go to the other. And when I fully decided that there was money in it for us all, I used Sam as a decoy duck to get the little lady into our grip."

"When I had her fast, I meant to dispose of him, in such a manner that there would be no difficulty in proving his identity and his death, both in one. Then—well, with the girl as sole heiress to some three millions or more, it wouldn't be hard to find her a suitable husband among us all! Then—*saboteur*?"

"A rare good trick, if it had all turned out as plotted, captain. But how now? Fenn Terry has got his grip on the girl, and if she's worth that big boodle, he'll hardly let go at first telling!"

Captain Kidd laughed shortly, a curious sneer running through the false merriment, and showing through his next words:

"I'm losing no sleep over Terry. If I could handle those two infernal bloodhounds as easily, I'd never—*Ha!*"

Captain Kidd turned swiftly toward the narrow passage through which he had gained entrance to the pocket, a hand on a revolver as he bent his ear in listening.

There came a repetition of the goat-like challenge, the reply, and with a brief delay in passing the sentinel, a man rushed hastily into their midst, pantingly ejaculating:

"*Hell to pay, cap'n!*"

CHAPTER XX.

CAPTAIN KIDD COUNTS HIS CHICKENS.

His presence there, the manner in which he had satisfied the man on guard in the narrow defile, together with his instant recognition of that disguised figure before whom he paused with an excited tossing of his arms, all went to prove the new-comer one of that evil gang. But he wore no such disguise as guaranteed the others from detection, even by their closest friends, and the moonlight was sufficiently bright to reveal the coarse features of Dan Dillon, the burly gambler.

"Have you been stirring it up, Dillon?" sharply demanded Captain Kidd, touching a fresh wound in the gambler's cheek with a finger-tip.

There was something in that cold, half-contemptuous, half-suspicious tone that acted on the gambler much as a douche of icy water would have done, and his reply came in a surly, growling note:

"I acted for what I thought was the best, captain, but if you don't want to hear me out, I'm not kicking."

"Where did you get that cut on your face?"

"From a knife-point—Satan grill the imp that cast it!"

"How did you get it? Where? Who from?"

"At the hotel. From Sandy Sands. He threw a knife through the pine partition, hitting me in the cheek as I was listening to him and that spider-legged gawk! Farrar swears he's Webb Tennant, the detective. And Tol is right, too!"

Dan Dillon spoke rather more at length than he had intended doing when he began to answer those crisp questions, but he saw that Captain Kidd was strongly interested, and felt that he might take risk.

"You heard them talking, you say? What about?"

"Enough points to keep me chinning from this till daybreak, captain! Why, only think—"

"You do the thinking, Dillon, and see how closely you can boil down the marvelous discoveries you claim to have made. First—what set you to playing spy on those two bloodhounds?"

"One of 'em downed my pard. And Tol asked me to see if I couldn't get even for him, when I had a chance to slip in a word unseen, back in the hills, boss."

"You preferred looking after Farrar's revenge to answering my call for a meeting, then?" coldly persisted the chief.

"I didn't think it was so late," muttered Dillon, growing dogged once more under that dangerous displeasure. "And when I saw my chance to steal a trick on the two fellows, knowing them most dangerous enemies to the whole family, I felt bound to make the most of it."

"All right, Dillon," grimly laughed Captain Kidd, with an entire change of manner. "You deserved a reprimand for being late at a special meeting, and I took this method of administering it. Now—make your peace by giving us some really important information."

Not a little subdued by the disagreeable trick which had been played upon him, the gambler told his story as concisely as he well could without omitting matter of importance. And in part he had his reward by seeing how eagerly even Captain Kidd listened to his words.

He said that he had been in a position to note the actions of the two men who had brought about the downfall of his partner, and when the landlord showed them up-stairs, he entered the office and made a mental note of the numbers attached to their signatures. This told him where to look for their chambers, and when Perkins returned alone to the office, he stole silently up the steps to learn what he might.

He was just in time to see the two men enter the chamber assigned to Webb Tennant, or "John Brown," as his name appeared on the register. He heard the key snap in the lock, and then ventured to steal silently to the adjoining room. The door was locked, but he found no difficulty in picking the cheap affair, without noise, when he crept inside and pressed an ear to the thin pine partition which alone separated the two rooms.

He went on to give "the meat" of all he heard while listening, and then told how one of the men—Sands, as he fancied, from what was being spoken at the time—cast a knife through the board, the keen point splitting his cheek and knocking a couple of double-teeth out.

He went on to tell how he escaped by leaping through the window, believing that he had escaped unseen; certainly he had not been recognized, by the moonlight.

"They didn't follow me, and so I made the best of my way here, to put you all on your guard, captain, and mates," he concluded.

The chief seemed fairly well satisfied with what had been told, since it went far to corroborate his own story, and he felt fairly certain that the enemy would never live long enough to carry out their half-formed plans.

"You've more than earned your forgiveness, Dillon," he said, with a grim nod of approval. "I'll furnish a mighty healing salve for that cheek of yours before day breaks, never you fear! Now, lads, a few more words of explanation, and we'll get down to sober business."

"You, Darby," singling out the man who had volunteered to pick a quarrel with the Sharp from Snap City and take his chances of shooting him, "and Simpkins come here for a moment. It's time you were doing your share of the work if the job's to be finished this night."

Drawing the two men aside, Captain Kidd whispered to them busily for a few minutes, then watched them leave the pocket by way of the pass. When they had disappeared, he turned to the remainder of the gang.

"Their part must be set to moving first, but I've work enough for you all, lads, never fear!"

"We're ready whenever you are, boss!"

"So am I," hesitated Dillon, fingering his smarting cheek, which he had not even taken time to tie up, so great had been his haste to tell his story to the chief. "But—those devils will be looking for a man with a mark like this, and—"

"They'll have something else to look after, Daniel," chuckled the black-beard, grimly. "Still, it might be awkward for you to explain just how you got that beauty-mark, and luckily I've an easy job that will take you out of the way for a few days—more or less."

"You all know what a fortune belongs to the little woman, lads. Dan does, though he learned it from the other side of the fence. That will save so much time, anyway!"

"Now we want that fortune to divide up between us, don't we?"

An eager chorus proved that they did, and Captain Kidd added:

"With Social Sam out of the way, that leaves only the girl to manage, for after to-night neither Spider-web nor the Snap City Sharp will cut any figure in the game; they're just as good as cold meat!"

"Dillon and Pierre the Knifer will go with

me. They will be quite sufficient to do the work, and I've other duties for the rest of you, of which more anon."

"I mean to get the Mather girl away from the house of Fenn Terry, by hook or crook, this very night. If that can be done without hurting Terry, so much the better; but I'll have the little beauty, no matter what it costs to get her."

"Why am I so anxious to get hold of her? Well, because I think I can manage to get hold of those jolly millions through the little girl. If one trick don't work, another must! But I believe that by carrying her away from those who claim to be her best friends, and keeping her in close quarters for a few days, I can wheedle her into believing I'm the one honest man in all this mighty globe!"

"The cap'n's the boy for to do the wheedlin', too!" enthusiastically came from one of the masks, in a stage whisper.

The rascal alluded to did not seem greatly angered by that comment, though he lifted a hand to enforce silence.

"Time is passing, and there's a heap to do, lads, so I'll only say that I'm pretty sure the thing will work like a charm. When Miss Mather has spent a few days in the old den, she'll be willing enough to surrender a dozen fortunes, if she had so many, for light and liberty once more!"

"Suppose she hangs fire, even then?"

"Then I'll marry her. She might kick at the notion, at first, but there's more ways than one to kill a cat, and after a bit of judicious persuasion, she'll jump at the chance of becoming Mrs. Kidd."

"We're satisfied if you are, captain."

"Glad to hear as much," with a covert sneer in his tones. "I'm working for the good of the entire family, remember, and though I may have to do the biggest share of the work, I'll only ask for my regular share of the boodle."

"Dillon, you and Pierre Chenault go over and wait for me, on the north side of the Terry place. I'll be with you in ample time to explain what you'll have to do. I have a few words to say to the rest of the lads, before I can join you."

"We'll be right there, ready and only waiting for the word, cap'n," nodded Dillon, moving toward the passage.

"Keep your eyes and ears open," laughed Captain Kidd. "We're going to give the town a thorough shaking up to-night, or I'm a liar!"

CHAPTER XXI.

FIGHTING THE FUMES.

CHLOROFORM!

The air was heavy with the peculiar, sickening, yet not wholly unpleasant fumes. So heavy that it seemed to lie like a blanket over the face of the man who had so providentially been aroused from the doze which was rapidly becoming slumber—a sleep that would have known no waking in this world!

Sandy Sands realized as much, by instinct; he could hardly be said to reason, as yet, for his brain was dulled beyond a vague wonder if any accident had happened to him, sufficiently serious to call for such a liberal use of the dangerous anæsthetic.

He tried to put this wonder into the form of a question, though he could see no person near who might be the operator; but he only succeeded in making a husky, rattling sound barely loud enough to reach his own ears—and they seemed preternaturally keen, too!

Yet there was nothing over his lips. No cone, no sponge, not even a folded handkerchief, though the little chamber seemed fuller than ever of that—yes, decidedly noxious vapor! It was smothering him, and those bungling—who was the operator? Why did he not attend to his duties? What did it all mean, anyhow?

Death!

That awful word seemed to ring through his brain, and gave to Alexander Sands the shock which might mean all the difference between living and dying.

For the first few seconds he believed that the word had been pronounced by human lips, and his first instinct was to look for that being. His eyes opened widely, and he tried to lift his head, the better to see the one who had spoken, the better to direct the question which his tongue vainly tried to shape.

That faint, benumbing spell passed from his brain before it left his other organs free for use. He recognized that dingy little chamber by the dim light that came through the window at the foot of his bed. And then, as his lungs seemed to choke up and refuse to perform their accustomed duty, he realized the peril which threatened him.

No accident had happened him, as yet, but one surely would unless he could rally, unless he could break that hideous spell!

Again he tried to shake off that death-like paralysis which held his limbs in chains—which had crept through his frame until it seemed that all was dead save his brain. Once again—and he succeeded so far as to lift his head an inch or so from the pillow.

The moon was still shining brightly, and

though its rays did not directly enter his chamber, the darkness was lessened sufficiently for him to distinguish objects about him. And that one brief glance told Sandy Sands he was alone in the room, unless some one was hidden by the bed itself.

How then had the drug been administered? Was he just recovering from its effects? Had the thieves stolen away with their plunder, or—

There came a faint, yet sharp clicking sound as though the door-knob had been struck by glass or metal, and as Sandy Sands swiftly turned his head enough to bring his eyes to bear, that noxious vapor seemed to fairly pour into the chamber!

Like a revelation of light the truth flashed across his brain, and the labored breath he was on the point of taking, was checked by a desperate exertion of rallying will power.

That clicking sound was produced by a syringe striking the knob or against the metal guard to the key-hole! His enemies were attempting to overcome his senses by squirting chloroform into the room!

It was hard to resist the temptation to roll from his bed and use his rallying powers for gaining fresh air, but Sandy Sands was equal to the task. Before he could reach and unlock the door, those dastards would surely take alarm and resort to hasty flight!

He lifted his head, still holding his breath, and quickly, thoroughly scanned his surroundings. No one was in the room with him, unless crouching low at the foot of the bed, or hidden beneath it, neither of which was at all likely.

In making that visual search, he noticed the stand and the pitcher of water standing upon it. And as his eyes touched the coat and vest which he had hung to the headboard, a means of relief flashed upon him.

His arm felt numb, but he managed to secure a large silk handkerchief from his breast pocket, and to noiselessly sink it in the pitcher without slopping over its contents. Then, when saturated, he brought out the handkerchief and covered his mouth and nostrils with it, letting a few drops of the grateful liquid trickle down his parched throat.

He drew in a full breath, and instantly felt great relief. The wet silk acted as a strainer, and purified the air before it was taken into his lungs.

The whirling left his brain, and though it still throbbed heavily, each moment in passing helped to clear away that dull confusion, as well as to send the sluggish blood more rapidly through his veins.

He could begin to reason now, and he knew that but a comparatively short space of time had elapsed since his first rousing from his doze.

He knew something of the workings of the drug his enemies were using. He knew that injecting into a room where one was *already asleep*, and thus gradually filling the air with its fumes, was the only sure method of bringing a strong, healthy person under its influence without that person's full consent. Administered after this fashion, the sleeper gradually becomes drugged, and if the process be kept up long enough, not only can he be thoroughly stupefied, but death will follow.

As for trying to overcome a healthy person by forcing him or her to inhale the drug, no sensible person would attempt such a thing, unless ready to risk a prolonged struggle, caring nothing for noise.

He knew he had not been awakened by such means, and he no longer thought of an enemy being concealed in his chamber. Whoever they were, the locked door was still between them.

His lungs were fairly free, and he found small difficulty in breathing, thanks to the dampened silk "strainer," though he used his lungs as little as possible, holding his breath as long as he well might, while studying what he had best do. One point was quickly mastered: he must make an opening through which fresh air could enter to drive the dangerous fumes out.

He took another cautious glance around the room, to confirm his first recollection. The bed was only partially in range with the key-hole, through which alone the rascals outside could gain a view of the interior. By drawing up his legs and slipping to the floor by the head of the bed, there would be no possibility of his being seen.

This he did, pausing to remove the case from his pillow, then crept silently to the door, hanging the slip over the knob, thus barring all sight from the outside, while leaving the key-hole unobstructed. And then, sinking low, he stole past the door, over to the window.

Using the utmost caution to avoid making a sound that could give the alarm to the chloroformers, Sandy Sands lifted the sash, inch by inch. He fully expected to find trouble in this action, but for a marvel the sash went up without hitch or squeak, until it could be lifted no higher. And lacking a better means of securing the sash from falling as soon as his support was removed, the Sharp broke off a match and thrust a portion between the sash and the weather-strip on each side.

When a gentle test told him the window was fairly secure, he slipped up the damp silk far enough to catch several full breaths of pure air,

then crept silently back to his bed, taking a pistol in each hand as he sat down, facing the door, to await events.

What would be the next act? Would the rascals try to pick his lock and enter, as soon as they felt assured their victim was thoroughly under the influence of the drug? Or, did they mean to keep pouring in the chloroform until death was assured?

Doubting if there was enough of darkness left for this last expedient, Sandy Sands took his watch from the vest still hanging from the headboard, opened it and turned the white dial toward window.

It was a task for strong, keen eyes, but he managed to distinguish the hands, and not a little to his amazement he saw that it was only a little past two o'clock!

"Time enough, if they've got patience to wait for that!" he mentally decided as he closed the watch, then silently put on both vest and coat.

Both articles contained valuables which he did not care to run the risk of losing, and he believed that the enemy would not wait much longer before making a decided move.

"If they do, maybe I'll open the ball myself!" he grimly muttered.

For possibly five more minutes the Sharp waited without sound or movement to tell him of the coming struggle. Then—surely the room was clearing of the fumes, yet—what was that odor? He slipped the handkerchief down under his chin, and with a long breath, he divined the startling truth.

The air was strongly tainted with smoke! Yes, he could detect it now, with his eyes as well as his nostrils. By gazing steadily toward the window, he could see a filmy cloud that seemed to be rapidly thickening. Yet—surely those devils without would not dare to call such means into play?

Even as he asked himself that question, Sandy Sands caught a faint sound coming from just outside his door, and believing that the villains meant to force an opening, he prepared to use his weapons as soon as he could distinguish a human shape to fire at.

The seconds crept by until two full minutes elapsed, but no further move was made by the enemy. The smoke grew thicker, and the Sharp had to draw up the wet handkerchief once more, to keep out the acrid fumes. They tickled his throat, and already he had to fight against the temptation to cough.

Scarcely had he done this, before he caught the sound of a shuffling footstep in the corridor without, but it seemed to pause close beside his door.

"Wonder if the imps are waiting on the chance of my being aroused and trying to escape by opening the door?" mused Sands, when fully convinced that the author of those stealthy footfalls had not passed on. "Wonder—why not?" with the faintest of chuckles. "Trap for trap, and I'm betting on this side of the fence!"

There was little time to waste in reflection. The smoke was rapidly increasing, and if fire was really intended by the rascals, it must soon burst forth with resistless fury. Whatever he did, must be quickly accomplished.

If he could be sure of unlocking the door without being detected by those listening knaves, he might make a swift dash as he flung the barrier wide, then turn on the enemy and at least meet them on equal footing. But could this be done?

"Hardly!" was his decision, remembering the key had turned in its wards as though the lock had rusted. "They'd hear, and get in the first blow. Then—why not?"

With an inward laugh, he unbuttoned his suspenders, slipping them off from under his coat and vest. He took the pitcher and poured the water on the floor, without making any sound to betray him. Then, facing the bed, which he already knew consisted of a tick filled with dried grass, he gave a low, gurgling groan, barely loud enough to be heard by any one listening close to the door.

Swiftly rolling the tick up, he twisted a blanket around it, then tied the braces around the bundle, using the extra length to hitch the water-pitcher to the upper end, all the time blending low moans and half-yawns with the rustling sounds which he could not avoid making in handling the grass-tick. And when the decoy was completed, he gave a choking cry, as though just awakening enough to realize his peril, stumbling toward the door and faintly shouting:

"Fire! fire! the house is— Help! help!"

He turned the key, opened the door, cast the bundle out into the corridor, where it fell with a crash as the pitcher broke."

CHAPTER XXII.

HOW THE SHARP SAVED THE SPIDER.

"TAKE it, confound ye—and I'll take you!" he growled as he flung out the decoy, much as a bewildered man might stumble and fall.

The words were still on his lips, when he saw a phantom-like shape leap upon the bundle, striking viciously with a dully-gleaming blade; for the lamp was still burning at the head of the stairs.

"Wait for me, pardner!" leaping forward, meaning to capture the villain; but he counted without his host.

A stout wire was stretched across the doorway, not quite knee high, and, striking this, Sandy Sands tripped and fell endlong, just when he felt that victory was surely his!

With a howl of angry disgust, mingling with personal fear, the man with the knife whirled and fled toward the rear of the building, confused by seeing two (seeming) persons come out where only one went in.

The Sharp rolled over and fired as he was rising, but the villain dashed on. A second shot had no better effect, for just then the rascal dove into one of the rooms, that sharp turn saving his life.

Sandy started to follow, but a savage oath from nearer the head of the stairs warned him of fresh peril, and he whirled, just in time to escape a well-intended bullet.

Smoke was filling the long hall so thickly that he could not with ease tell how many enemies he might have to contend with, and his derringers being both empty he deemed prudence the better part of valor, and darted back into his chamber, closing the door and turning the key.

Snatching up his hat and valise, he clapped the first upon his head, and after a hasty glance at the ground outside of the window, he dropped the grip out, quickly following after.

He alighted safely, and snatching up the valise he ran across to where the patch of weeds and small trees stood, under cover of which Dan Dillon had escaped but a few hours earlier that same night.

Dropping the grip-sack into this cover, the Sharp quickly recharged his derringers, using his eyes to the best advantage meanwhile.

He saw nothing of his foemen, but his ears told him the alarm was spreading through the hotel, and though the red flames were beginning to show through the windows, he had little fear of human life being sacrificed thereby, after the racket he had made in attempting to trap the trappers.

"Wasn't quite so much of a bungle, after all!" he grimly laughed, though a flush of mortification came into his face as he recalled his failure, just when he felt most certain of success. "Father Perkins will be out of a job, but losing his property is heap sight better than losing his life, and the row I kicked up would break the slumbers of even the Seven Sleepers!"

Hastily opening his valise, Sands took out a revolver, shutting the grip and pushing it into the tangle of weeds as he muttered:

"Now to take a look for my meal! If Spider—*holy smoke!*"

For the first time he remembered that his enemies in New Dorado were almost certainly the enemies of Webb Tennant. What if the same trick had been tried on him? What if he had been soundly sleeping before the chloroform was injected through his key-hole?

"If so—and he was in bed a full hour before me! If so, maybe the poor fellow never suspected his peril."

With that thought chilling his blood, Sandy Sands sprung from cover, rushing toward the corner of the hotel in which he knew the chamber assigned to Tennant was situated. He could see the window fronting toward the trees, placing it readily enough after the Dillon episode. And as the red light showed the sashes closed, he caught up a heavy stone and with sure aim hurled it through the glass.

Not a sound came back, though the noise of splintering glass, of the stone striking the door opposite, then thumping to the floor, ought to have aroused the soundest sleeper.

"Drugged—maybe dead!" hoarsely panted Sands, pale as death, but only stirred to swifter action by that fearful reflection.

Already the flames were bursting through several of the lower windows, sending fiery tongues curling up to lick the sides of the house and make the heated glass crackle in the upper sashes. Already the alarm, so thrilling, so awe-inspiring when given birth in a place utterly devoid of means and appliances for fighting the flames, was spreading through the town. And, as Sandy sprung around to the front of the hotel, he saw that a number of men had already gathered to the scene of rapidly growing interest and excitement.

Though he knew that among them his enemies were almost certain to be counted, he never stopped for word or glance, but, thinking only of the man whom he had sought for a partner in the perilous game he was playing against such heavy odds, he dashed into the building and up the steep stairs, which already felt hot to his feet, and where the air was like the inside of a furnace.

He heard loud cries of warning, but he paid them no heed. He knew that even such desperate rascals as his enemies had proven themselves would hardly dare follow him into that fire-trap. If they had, he would hardly have stopped to oppose them, while the life of Webb Tennant hung trembling in the balance.

The lamp at the head of the stairs had been extinguished, but the rapidly-growing flames gave light enough for his present purpose. If he had stopped for a backward glance, he would

have seen more than one red spark showing through the steps he had just leaped up.

Running direct to Tennant's chamber, he turned sideways and dashed one shoulder against the pine door, splintering the panels and breaking both lock and hinges with that one fierce effort, almost falling headlong as he tripped over a wire stretched across the opening.

That was proof sufficient that the dastards had been at work here as well, and Sandy was prepared for the sight of the gaunt detective lying still as a corpse on his narrow bed.

The room was full of smoke, but a ruddy light showed through it with sufficient distinctness for Sands to see what he was doing. And as a bit of splintered glass cut his foot, covered only with a thin cotton sock, giving him a hint as to future needs, he caught up the clothes which Tennant had discarded for the night, and dropped them out of the window, broken by that heavy stone. He hurled the locked gripsack after, then caught the detective by an arm and shook him vigorously, at the same time calling him by name and warning him of danger.

"Drugged—or dead!" he muttered, lifting the limp body and swinging it over his shoulder, crossing the treacherous wire without accident, but recoiling from the stair-case as a volume of flame rolled up, coming almost close enough to singe his mustaches.

He turned and dashed along the corridor until he reached his own room. He dropped Tennant long enough to break the door down, then dragged the body over the wire, again lowering it until he could find and hastily pull on his boots.

There was time enough for this, though the little chamber was heated like an oven nearly ready for the baking. The worst of the fire was in the front of the building, as though the fiends who started it, had calculated on cutting off all escape by those so luckless as to be caught sleeping up-stairs.

The brave rescuer cast a hurried glance out through the open window, but saw nothing to bar the way, though the fire was rapidly working in that direction, quickened by the rising breeze. Lifting the senseless detective, Sandy pushed him through the window, lowering him by a grip on both arms, then letting go.

"Mercy on those pipe-stem legs, Spider!" he cried, as he prepared to follow, though, to avoid falling on his friend, he would have to jump instead of simply dropping.

Even as he made his leap, he caught sight of a man rushing toward the spot, and, as he struck the ground, he heard a savage curse. He rallied, and leaped upon the fellow, sending out a clinched fist in advance with a force that knocked the man end over end a dozen feet away.

Tennant was lying perilously near to a window through which the flames were pouring in a lurid sheet, and Sands could not follow up his advantage without risking entirely too much. So, catching up the still unconscious detective in his strong arms, he ran with him across to the cover under which he had stowed his own gripsack.

The sight of this reminded him of Tennant's belongings, and leaving the detective for a time, he hastened to collect these, though it was like entering a furnace to reach the spot where they lay scattered.

He saw that the fellow whom he had knocked down, had recovered sufficiently to steal or run away, and with his arms full, he returned to where he had left Webb Tennant—to find him sitting up, looking very ill at the stomach, and thoroughly bewildered, yet very unlike a corpse!

"You—you saved my life!" he gasped, faintly, as he recognized Sandy Sands, guessing the truth by the clothes he bore in his arms.

"Why not?" laughed the Sharp. "You're worth just a thousand dollars to me, pardner!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

WARRING ON WEAK WOMEN.

"No need to be in such a mighty rush getting here, Knifer, was there?" mumbled Dan Dillon in a tone just a little too loud if he intended his words for the ears of Pierre Chenault alone.

The two men had lost little time in hastening from the place of meeting to lie in wait near the Terry mansion, on the north side, as directed by Captain Kidd. No further instructions had been given them at the time, but the chief had promised to join them, and then they expected to have their work pointed out at once.

Captain Kidd joined them, though not quite so speedily as they had anticipated. He came around from the front of the building, which proved that he had not taken the most direct route to join his waiting men, though there was nothing particularly out of the way in that. No doubt he had been placing the rest of the gang, or showing them where their evil labors were to begin.

Asking them in a whisper if their weapons were in good order, and when this question was answered in the affirmative, bidding them keep in mind the urgent necessity of doing their work with as little racket as possible, he added:

"Use your knives if anything turns up to call for fighting, but don't burn powder unless it's to actually save your lives. Remember—and now follow me!"

This sounded like business, and smarting with

pain from his cut cheek and broken teeth, Dillon felt a grim joy at the prospect.

He had plenty of time in which to think it over, though, for Captain Kidd only took them around to where they could lie in cover and watch the front of the building. Instead of prompt action, there was to be another spell of waiting and guessing, all the more trying because neither of the subordinate characters had the slightest idea what was to be done, or how they were to set about doing it.

They fancied there was to be an abduction, judging from what Captain Kidd had said, back at the little amphitheater; but belief was not certainty, and as the minutes slowly dragged along, the gambler's grim joy turned to utter disgust.

At length he ventured to give Captain Kidd a hint as to the state of his mind, and so sent a shot at him over the shoulders of Pierre, the Knifer.

Chenault made no reply, possibly because he was of a more prudent nature, though a low, ugly growl coming from the dark mass which represented their chieftain may have had something to do with it.

Then, only a few moments later, Captain Kidd lifted his head with a grim laugh of triumph as he detected a dull red glow beginning to show itself above the town.

"Look, lads! the red cock is crowing at last!" he muttered, one gloved hand pointing this out to his satellites.

"House a-fire, by glory!" ejaculated Dillon, starting to his feet with a degree of excitement hard to realize by those who live in town or city where the flames are fought only by hired skill.

"Down, you fool!" harshly ordered his master, jerking the gambler back by an arm. "It's part of the game, and listen!"

He could not be sure, but he fancied he could detect one or more pistol-shots, borne to his keen ears by the favoring breeze. Only for a single breath, then he banished the notion, possibly because he did not want to believe it. That would almost surely indicate fighting on the part of the dangerous foemen whom he had so pitilessly doomed to suffer death, and he greatly preferred otherwise.

Let them die in silence! There must be nothing to awaken too dangerous suspicion in the brains of his fellow townsmen.

That ruddy glow rapidly grew more distinct, and by the time the first thrilling shouts of "fire!" came floating that way, the flames were beginning to show themselves above the buildings standing nearer the covert of the outlaws.

Dillon and Chenault watched the light, but after the first few glances, Captain Kidd never turned his face in that direction, his keen eyes flashing along the front of the house near which they were lying in wait. But as the seconds grew into minutes, each one seeming of tenfold length just then, he squirmed and fidgeted as he lay, growling at first, then cursing viciously as he failed to catch sight of the figure for which he was watching.

"What the foul fiend keeps him, anyway? Sleeping? The reflection on those windows ought to be enough to waken a corpse! If he fails—if he waits until too late—Knifer!"

"Ready, boss!"

Captain Kidd paused to sweep the front of the house with his eyes once more. All was still about the place. A dim light was burning in one of the upper rooms, but all the building was without illumination save where the red glow of the burning hotel was reflected from the unshuttered glass.

"Knifer, run around and jump the fence yonder. Play you was coming from the hills. Split your lungs as you come by the house, yelling fire! I want to rouse up Fenn Terry and get him out of there!"

Chenault paused only long enough to ask:

"I shall come back zis place, zen, capitaine?"

"Of course; I'll need you. Lively, now!"

Active as a panther, the half-breed sped away, and before most men could have covered half the distance, he was racing back close to the house, like one taking the most direct route without regard to roads or lines, screaming like a veritable demon of intense excitement:

"Fire! fire! all ze town make burn oup! Fire! fire! fire!"

"Good boy!" grimly laughed Captain Kidd, as he watched and listened to this performance. "If Terry don't pile out at that, it's because he lacks the will, not the ears!"

"What am I to do when he comes, cap'n?" ventured Dillon. "You only gave orders for me to come here and wait; you didn't say what for."

"Keep waiting until— They're astir, at last!" as he saw one of the curtains in the sick chamber swept aside and caught a glimpse of Mrs. King's generous form through the glass. "Come out o' that, Terry!"

He had not long to wait, after Mrs. King left the window, and by the time fleet-footed Chenault had returned, the front door was flung open and the master of the place sprang forth, turning when just clear of the veranda to cry out:

"Go back, mother! Go to Miss Mather, and tell her we're in no danger here. I'll return as soon as I can, but they need every man's arm down yonder! The whole town must go unless—"

His own excitement seemed growing until he could not wait to finish that sentence, even, and without pausing to see whether or no Mrs. King obeyed, Fenn Terry leaped over the fence and sped away, adding his tones to the others that filled the town with a roar as of Babel.

Captain Kidd touched his men, hastily muttering:

"I'm going for the Miss Mather Terry spoken of, and you two must see that the old lady don't raise too loud a yawp."

"Ze knife, capitaine?" grinned the half-breed, flashing forth the ugly weapon which, through his over-readiness to use it on the slightest provocation, had given him his title.

"No, you bloodsucker!" growled his chief, striking the armed hand down. "Just grab and bundle her up. Choke her a bit, if you can't manage her tongue any easier, but don't do any serious harm. There'll be racket enough kicked up over this night's work without anything of that sort."

He crouched under cover as much as the nature of the ground would permit, running swiftly over the neatly kept lawn to the nearest corner of the building, then leaping upon the veranda and making a dash for the front door, which Mrs. King was just in the act of closing.

She gave a little cry of alarm at his coming, but Captain Kidd pushed her back with the door, driving the breath out of her lungs as he crowded her tightly against the wall.

"Take her, lads!" he growled, passing on as the two knaves came over the threshold. "Stop her howling, but don't hurt her to speak of. Bring her up-stairs, if you can carry such a mountain of fat!"

He was half-way up the flight as the last words passed his lips, and a dozen quick leaps from the landing brought him to the partly open door of the chamber in which May Mather had been soundly sleeping until awakened by the wild ejaculations of Mrs. King when that excitable lady discovered the fire in town.

The poor girl was in the act of rising from bed when Captain Kidd flung open the door, but she sunk back with a quivering cry of fright as she caught sight of that forbidding figure: thoroughly disguised by wig and false beard, slouched hat and army overcoat.

"Where am I? Who are you?" she gasped, but before she could do or say more, Captain Kidd was by her side, a gloved hand tapping her pale lips as he hurriedly uttered:

"Not a sound, Miss Mather, if you value your liberty—ay, your life, I might say! I'm come to save you from the demons who so cruelly murdered your brother, and—"

He broke off abruptly, for the poor girl shrunk from his touch, and with a choking cry seemed to swoon outright.

Just then the two outlaws came panting up the stairs, bearing Mrs. King between them, that worthy soul being too badly frightened to help herself, as they at first ordered her to do.

"Bring the the old cat in here, lads," he ordered, changing his plans to suit the emergency. "Keep her from yelping out while I rig up a purchase to— Steady, now!"

Catching up a towel from the rack near the dresser, Captain Kidd twisted it into a roll, then hastily but securely tied the bandage over the mouth of the frightened woman, speaking distinctly as he did so:

"Act sensibly, Mrs. King, and you shall not be hurt. Cut up rusty, and I'll take your scalp away with me! So— Stand up, will you?"

As he spoke and gave a nod to his men, they released their grip on Mrs. King. She staggered, but Captain Kidd steadied her for a moment.

"Leave her with me, lads. See what you can pick up down-stairs, but be ready to travel when I give the word."

Willingly enough the two rascals turned away, though Dillon cast a covert look of admiration at the fair girl on the bed. She was stirring, and her dark eyes were opening once more.

"One word is as good as a thousand, old lady," sharply added Captain Kidd, a grip of his muscular fingers lending emphasis to his speech. "I will leave you just as good as I found you, provided you don't try to take off that muzzle, and do help Miss Mather to put on her clothes in a holy hurry. Say you'll obey, or I'll slit your fat throat!"

He drew a knife and flashed it for an instant before her frightened face and eyes, then returned it to its sheath. With a nod toward Miss Mather, who was gazing at him in bewilderment, he addressed her:

"There's no time to waste in arguing. You're going with me, and you'll need clothes to protect you from the night-air. Shall I help you put them on, or will you manage to get along with what assistance Mrs. King can lend you?"

"But I don't—"

"But you must and shall," his tones growing pitiless. "Another word of remonstrance—an-

other minute cut to waste—and I'll take you just as you are. Help her dress, Mrs. King, or—*you know!*"

Tapping the haft of his knife, the villain turned and stepped just outside the chamber door, yet stading where he could easily frustrate any attempt to close that frail barrier, should such an effort be made.

"I'll give you five minutes for the dressing act, ladies!" he cast back over a shoulder, then turned his face toward the stairs.

And Mrs. King, only knowing that she would be brutally butchered unless she obeyed, fell to work as best she could, though her hands trembled so violently that they were almost helpless.

And May, fearing ruder treatment, began to dress herself.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HOW THE SHARP "SMELT A MICE."

Up to the moment when Sandy Sands laughingly turned away that unsteady expression of thanks by reminding Webb Tennant that one thousand dollars of his money was in the detective's keeping, the man whom he had so daringly rescued from certain death, realized little more than that he had been saved from death by the flames. But, that allusion served to drive away those numbing fumes from his brain, and with a choking cry he staggered to his feet, gasping:

"The body—let me go! I'll save it or—"

"Steady, pardner?" and the Sharp caught him about the body, at the same time pinning both arms to his side.

"Let up! I will—it's burning up, and I haven't—"

"Would you roast in company, man?" half-angrily interposed Sands, lifting the struggling detective clear of the the ground and carrying him further under cover, lest their struggle attract dangerous attention. "Look, man, and see what a fool trick that would be, now! Why, the whole shell is a mass of flames!"

With a deft motion he turned Tennant around so that he could gain a fair view of the fire. And, despite his great excitement, the detective was forced to recognize the truth. Not even a salamander could force a way into that blazing mass, with any hope of emerging again.

His struggles to free himself ceased, and feeling his muscles relax, Sands unlocked his fingers, though still keeping a hand on the man.

"Take a look at the fire, pardner, then look at the crowd gathering in front," he said: "Then sweep your two eyes down over your own person. Wouldn't you look immense, though, taking a stroll over yon' way! What would the ladies say? There's a right smart chance of 'em out there, too!"

For the first time Tennant seemed to realize his own condition as he glanced over himself, but it was not this that kept him from making a mad dash in hope of rescuing the body of Social Sam.

His brain was throbbing, dizzy from the noxious vapor he had been breathing for so many minutes. He felt weak and sick at the stomach. Yet he would have conquered all that and risked death itself to save that corpse from being devoured by the flames, if he could have seen even the ghost of a chance.

There was none. The entire front and one side of the hotel was in flames, and as none could enter, so naught that was within those four walls could be taken out.

"It's a devilish piece of work!" muttered Sandy, his handsome face showing pale even in that red glare. "The hotel is gone already, but it'll soon have company; the whole town must go, unless something is done in a holy hurry!"

"How did it happen? Why didn't I wake up before—you carried me out, didn't you?"

"Dropped you out of a window—yes," nodded the Sharp. "You were drugged, as those devils tried to drug me; by squirting chlorform into the room where you were sleeping!"

"Who—but you can't mean it, man!" gasped Tennant, that startling news serving to rally his scattered wits, more than all else. "It would be rank murder! You must be mistaken!"

"Not a mistake, pardner. I wasn't quite far enough gone in sleep to take in the drug without kicking, and so—I can prove all I say, but there's better work for a man to be doing! Those fools need a head to direct their work, and I'll offer mine for lack of a better."

He turned to join the excited crowd, but Tennant caught an arm.

"Who did it? Tell me so much, and I'll—"

"Captain Kidd, or some of his gang. Dress yourself and try to get back enough nerve to hold your own should any of the imps try to down you in the confusion. I'm going to help those—"

He stopped short with a curious look on his face as he caught the words spoken by a clear, commanding voice:

"Steady, men! You've got to work by rule if you hope to save the town. First thing is to make a breach which the flames can't leap over against our fighting! This way, volunteers!"

"Fenn Terry, by glory!"

"His work—now I begin to see it all!"

"They've got the head, at last, and I'll have time to help you into your duds, pardner. But—what did you mean by 'his work'?"

"You said Captain Kidd—that is the man!" doggedly replied Tennant, losing his qualms in growing excitement, and beginning to dress himself in the garments so thoughtfully saved by Sands.

"All right, pardner, but keep the news to yourself for the rest of this night, at least," responded the Sharp. "Rig up, and alter your looks as much as you can. Keep an eye on every side of you, and don't run up against a knife in the crowd. I saved you from one, after dropping you out of the window, but I may not be near enough to do it over again the next time."

"Wait a bit, and I'll be ready to go with you."

"Better not. You got too heavy a dose to do much work for a time, and I want you to use your eyes instead of your hands. Keep watch on Fenn Terry, since you're so sure he's the game I asked you to help me bag. But don't forget Doc Kemper, in case you should chance upon him in the crowd. *Sabe?*"

Without pausing for a reply, Sands dashed away, joining the crowd which, under command of Terry, was already beginning to work with something like system, though the lack of water and appliances to make it of account, confined their efforts almost entirely to destroying in place of saving.

The breeze, which had been gentle all the evening, was now increasing as the air grew more heated, and one or two other buildings had caught fire from the blazing hotel, now little more than a mass of ruins.

Unfortunately the breeze was blowing toward the main portion of the town, and as their only hope of preventing the flames from making a clean sweep, the citizens were preparing to blow up and tear down a row of buildings in advance, hoping almost against hope that they could thus save the most valuable part of their town.

Sands saw that until the explosions should be complete, there was no opening for him to work. The volunteers were too many as it was, impeding rather than assisting each other. And while waiting for the right moment to take hold, he tried to recognize his enemies, feeling pretty well assured that some of them must be close at hand.

He was engaged after this fashion, though without success, when he saw Webb Tennant coming up, and his first glance caused him to smile broadly.

The detective, following his hint, had attempted to change his appearance as much as possible with the limited means at his command; but though he kept his face fairly well concealed, that gaunt, bony, angular frame and spider-like legs defied all disguise.

"Don't try it, pardner," Sands hastily muttered as Tennant came up. "Show your face, or they'll be running you up a limb as the incendiary—sure!"

"Look and listen!" hoarsely muttered Tennant, smothering an almost irresistible inclination to vomit, still ill from the drugging. "And all his shouting and splurging won't make me believe but what he's at the bottom of all this! I tell you, sir—"

That growing sickness overcame him, and as Sands led him hastily back to the covert he muttered in an ear:

"Lie low—keep still until you've got over the drug. Then keep an eye open for Terry and Kemper. It *may* be you're right. It *may* be that he really is—"

The sentence was left incomplete, as a startling fear flashed across his busy brain. Was all this intended only to effect the total destruction of himself and comrade? Was there not still another one to strike at? Was not May Mather in deadly peril, as well?

It was not reason that brought him to this point. It was purely an instinct which, in a wild and troubled life, had more times than one stood him in good stead. And though he might not have been able to explain why he came to that conclusion, Sandy Sands felt that the young girl whom he had vowed should share his name and fortunes, was in need of his assistance.

Without stopping to explain all this to Webb Tennant, he told him to rally and follow his wishes as fully as possible, then dashed off, passing to the rear of the hotel and thus avoiding coming into contact with the denser portion of the excited crowd.

No one had eyes for him as he raced along, and he drew clear of the brightly illumined space without check or adventure, only slackening his pace when he came in sight of the Terry mansion, and saw that everything about it seemed peaceful and quiet.

With his fears greatly lessened, Sandy Sands watched the building for a few seconds, noting the dim light showing through the chamber windows where he believed May Mather was located. Then, meaning to say that Terry had sent word that they were in no danger, he advanced.

But as he reached the veranda, the door opened and a man leaped out upon him. Both fell heavily down the steps together.

CHAPTER XXV.

A FIGHT AND A CHASE.

CAPTAIN KIDD stood on guard at the chamber door, his keen sense of hearing warning him of each motion made by the women within.

He knew that Mrs. King was too badly frightened to be of much service in assisting May Mather to dress, but so long as his orders were carried out, he cared little how imperfectly, or by whose hands it was accomplished.

He could hear his fellows at work in the rooms below, and scowled behind his disguise at their lack of caution. Yet he let them work their will, knowing that by keeping too tight a rein he ran the risk of having it break in his hands.

"And if the devils once got their heads—well, they'd swallow me, without making two bites of it!" he reflected.

"Time's up, ladies!" he called out, as a brief warning, before turning to cast an inquiring glance into the chamber.

He saw that Miss Mather was nearly dressed, and with a note of approval in his tones, he added:

"Put on your head-gear and other wraps, dear, if you'll be so very obliging. We're going to take a ride, and the mountain air is rather cool, even at this time of year."

"But—what have I done to—"

"It's not what you have done, but what you're going to do that I'm talking about, Miss Mather," was the curt interruption. "You are going with friends, whether you recognize them or not. If you go quietly, so much the better. But, *you are going!*"

With that Captain Kidd turned and sent a low but penetrating whistle down the staircase, the sound reaching his imps where they were striving to break open the iron safe used by Fenn Terry for keeping his papers and other valuables in, and though they gave a united growl of disappointment, neither rascal dared delay responding to that summons.

"The old woman is tired, and needs putting to bed," chuckled Captain Kidd, with a nod toward Mrs. King, whose trembling legs had failed her at last, and who had sunk down on the edge of the bed vacated by May Mather. "Roll her up in a blanket, to guard against taking cold, and fix it so she can't kick the cover off. Quick work, now!"

Horribly frightened as the two ruffians sprung toward her, Mrs. King tried to escape their clutches, to tear that bandage from her lips, and scream aloud for help; but the two strong-armed, deft-handed rascals made quick work of it, wrapping a blanket about the poor woman, tying it firmly in place with the sheets. And when they drew back, Mrs. King lay a helpless bundle on the bed.

"That's all right, lads," said Captain Kidd, with an approving nod as he caught May in his arms by a swift movement, one hand pressing over her lips just in time to smother her cry of mingled fear and indignation. "Knifer, go take a look outside and see if the coast is all clear. If so, give a call. Follow me, Dillon."

It was while obeying this order, that Pierre Chenault swung open the front door, just as Sandy Sands was reaching out a hand to knock on the panel, and it would be difficult to say which man was the most surprised.

"Sacr-r-re-ment!" snarled the Knifer, obeying his wolfish instincts and leaping straight at the throat of the stranger, without stopping to ask whether he was friend or foe, never stopping to see whether he was alone or had a regiment at his back.

With nineteen men out of a score, his victory would have been an easy one, but the Sharp from Snap City proved himself that exception, and though taken completely by surprise, his balance destroyed by that savage leap, Sandy grappled with the vicious half-breed as they tumbled headlong down the steps to the lawn.

The shock was something terrible, but it did not prevent Chenault from drawing his ever-ready knife, and as he felt the keen blade penetrating flesh, he cried out sharply:

"I clear-a ze vay, capitaine! Go wiz ze—*Sacr-r-re!*" hissing with venom as the Sharp almost turned him over. "You like-a some more? You make ze gr-r-and kick, eh?"

Half-stunned by the fall, added to the weight of the half-breed, Sandy Sands made the best fight he was capable of. He caught a gleam of steel, and though he could not arrest the blow, by a sudden twist of his body he partly evaded the weapon, and what Pierre felt was his blade glancing along a rib instead of burying its length as he believed.

The pain was keen, and seemed to lend Sandy a fresh supply of strength. He freed one arm, and as the Knifer snarled those words in his face, he caught the armed hand even as it descended, turning it to one side and letting the blow fall on the ground instead.

All this took place with such rapidity that neither Captain Kidd nor Dan Dillon fully realized what was in the wind, though knowing that trouble of some sort was brewing.

The outlaw chief swung May Mather over one shoulder, gripping a revolver in his free hand, springing down the stairs and through the hall, close upon the heels of the burly gambler.

"Down the curl!" he gratingly cried, as he saw the Knifer struggling with a single adversary. "Down him, then follow to the horses!"

He dashed away from the house, while Dillon, with clubbed revolver, watched for an opening, trying to distinguish friend from foe by the uncertain moonlight.

He thought he saw an opening, and struck sharply; but just then Sandy Sands threw all his powers in one effort, turning the half-breed over and coming uppermost himself.

That unexpected movement destroyed Dillon's aim, and his wrist struck Sands instead of his pistol-butt, the shock almost snapping the bones, and sending the weapon out of his benumbed fingers.

He recoiled, with a snarling curse of pain and fury, just in time to see Pierre throw up his knife-hand in a blind stroke; to see his wrist caught by the Sharp, then forced downward with a savage plunge. To hear the half-breed give a hideous screech as his furious struggles ceased forever!

Believing himself crippled, and seeing Sandy Sands gaining his feet, Dillon turned and fled at top speed along the course his chief had laid out, instinctively dodging and ducking in expectation of being made a target for flying lead.

That would hardly have saved the ruffian, had Sandy Sands been anything near his usual self, just then.

Leaving the knife buried in the throat of its owner, the Sharp staggered to his feet, dashing a hand across his eyes to clear his blurred vision, glancing around to discover the dear one who had uttered that appealing shriek. He saw her—saw a female figure being swiftly hurried away by a dark form which instinct told him must be the "capitaine" of that vicious rascal now gasping out his evil life on the bloodstained sward.

With a hoarse, choking cry the Sharp leaped forward in chase, drawing the revolver he had taken from his valise, trying to cover that fleeing shape—but he did not fire.

He dared not take the risk, at such a distance, and in such an uncertain light, lest he kill the girl instead of her abductor.

He sprung forward, running with a speed that bade fair to not only overtake Dan Dillon, but pick up his master as well; but it was not so written. He swerved from a straight course, running blindly into a bit of stiff shrubbery, where he fell, almost helpless for the moment.

Although it had not troubled him seriously up to this moment, he was feeling the evil effects of the chloroform. It might have passed off without actually showing itself, but that heavy fall and the short but fierce fight which followed, together with the wound he had received, aided the poisonous drug, and he lay there, retching terribly.

Only for a short space, but those last moments were of immense importance to all concerned in this adventure.

It gave Captain Kidd time to gain the covert where he had caused horses to be stationed for himself, his destined captive, and his two evil assistants. It gave him time to mount the lady on her horse, to spring into his own saddle, and for Dan Dillon to come up with the unwelcome tidings that Pierre the Knifer was dead!

His own wrist seemed crippled, though no bones were broken, as a hasty inspection showed. And scrambling into the saddle, he followed his leader, the extra horse being led by its halter.

And this was what Sandy Sands saw, as he fought down that deathly sickness, regaining his feet to stare about him with dimmed eyes. He saw May Mather being carried away, and caught her faint, despairing cry as her horse broke into a gallop beside that ridden by Captain Kidd.

"Brace up, you baby!" grated the Sharp, staggering forward in pursuit. "Git thar you've got to git thar!"

It was a rare triumph of wind over matter, and hardly one man in a hundred could have gained so complete a victory. His stomach ceased turning wrong side out. His dizziness passed off. His sight grew clear, and with every stride he made, some of his lost powers seemed to return.

It looked like a foolhardy, hopeless adventure—one man chasing two desperate, well-armed ruffians, both of whom were mounted on good horses and riding at a gallop!

"But I'll git thar!" doggedly muttered the Sharp, as his strides grew longer and quicker, his physical powers steadily reviving.

He saw that Captain Kidd was heading for the hills, and knew that, once the broken ground was reached, a horseman would have little if any advantage over one on foot, so far as speed was concerned, while the latter could keep a horse and rider in sight much more readily than his own actions could be noted.

There was one great danger—that of being distanced so far at the start that the enemy might give him the slip by a change of course while out of sight, and to avoid this Sandy Sands strained every nerve, running as one who feels his earthly all is at stake.

By the time his full powers returned, the kidnappers had gained such a start that he could catch only occasional glimpses of them, while he

knew that it was almost impossible for them to know for certain that he was on their track. This lent him fresh hope, for their pace would surely be slackened ere long. And he was right.

The chase led direct for the hills, and when the edge of the rough ground was reached, Captain Kidd drew rein to cast a look backward.

Though they were a long distance ahead, Sandy Sands soon noticed this fact, and though he hardly slackened his pace, he kept as much under cover as possible, knowing that his risks would be doubled should the outlaws discover him in pursuit so early.

He gained so much ground while the horsemen stood still gazing toward town, where the conflagration painted the sky blood-red, that he drew his revolver and leveled it at the figure which, from its close proximity to May Mather, he felt must be the arch-villain. He covered the dark form perfectly, but hesitated to risk a shot by moonlight. He knew what the weapon could do, and under ordinary circumstances would have risked the shot without hesitation; but the distance was long, the light deceiving, and a slight variation might carry death or injury to the innocent instead of the guilty.

"Too far—I must get closer!" he muttered, and began creeping across the open stretch of ground, where the moonlight fell brightly.

But before he had taken a dozen steps in advance, the horsemen wheeled and vanished amid the rocks and shadows.

Reckless of a possible ambushade, Sandy Sands sprung forward in pursuit, reaching the rocks and keeping on by the sound of hoof-strokes alone, until he entered a narrow valley where the horsemen could only press straight ahead. He followed this for two miles or more, catching occasional glimpses of his game, but unable to close in with them, despite his dogged efforts.

For several minutes he had not seen nor heard anything of his game, and his anxiety turned to something close akin to despair as he came to a point where the valley was divided into two equal defiles. And as he paused in doubt, a pistol or rifle exploded, causing him to reel and fall.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CAPTAIN KIDD SETS A SNARE.

THE Sharp from Snap City was only partly right when he reasoned that his enemies could not possibly have made that halt at the edge of the rocky hills for the purpose of judging whether or no any one was in chase.

Dillon had told his leader of the blow he had dealt the man who was fighting with Pierre the Knifer, and declared that he felt sure he had laid the rascal out for keeps, fearing to admit his cowardice in taking to flight without a second attempt to cover their tracks beyond all doubt. But Captain Kidd was playing for high stakes, and was not a man to take aught for granted.

If any person was in pursuit, he must expose himself in trying to cross that long, level stretch of moonlight, and while taking a final look toward the red ruin his orders, if not his own hand, had brought upon New Dorado, he kept guard over that tell-tale bit of ground.

His keen eye caught sight of Sandy Sands the instant he left his cover in the desperate attempt to get close enough for a certain shot, and it was this discovery which sent the outlaws so hastily into the shadows cast by the towering rocks.

"Look back, you fool, and see what your boasted work amounts to!" the road-agent snarled, viciously, then shortened his grip on the halter of the horse ridden by May Mather, hurrying along deeper into the hills.

Dan Dillon took one swift glance, and with a double fear in his bosom, followed after his chief. It was on his lips to propose an ambushade, but after that savage snarl, he dared not speak until spoken to.

For some little time their flight was maintained in verbal silence, pressing their steeds to as great a speed as the rough nature of the trail would permit.

Captain Kidd seemed at no loss which course to take, though there was nothing to show that the route had ever been traveled before. As a rule he kept a straight course. If forced to deviate by some obstacle which could not be surmounted, he would return to the same general direction as soon as the obstacle was rounded.

This persistence puzzled Dan Dillon not a little, at first, for he knew that Captain Kidd was not taking the shortest means of reaching the "old den" in which he had intimated their captive was to be imprisoned until means could be taken to wrest her fortune from her; but soon after striking the narrow valley, the enigma was solved for him.

Captain Kidd called him closer, and lengthening the halter by which he held the horse ridden by May Mather under control, he leaned toward his follower and spoke rapidly in low tones:

"If that fellow be either of the two men I've in mind, Dillon, he's still on our track—a perfect sleuth!"

"Shall I try to drop him, boss?"

"Not only try—you've got to do it!" was the fierce retort. "No half-way doings, Dillon,

this time. Down the hound, and see that he never gets up again of his own accord!"

The burly gambler tested his wrist, which was sore and aching, but strong enough for all the use such an ambushade would put it to.

"I'll do it, boss! Shall I drop out now?"

"No. There's a better place not far ahead. I had it in my mind when I came this way. I'll let you know when we come to the spot."

He said no more, but touched his horse with the spur, riding more rapidly now that they had comparatively level ground to cover. He kept his captive close to his side, watching keenly how she stood the ride, but speaking very few words to her.

Up to this time, May Mather had surprised him by her strength and calmness. He had expected to have trouble with her, if not to be obliged to carry her before him on his own horse. He looked for cries, for tears and broken pleadings, instead of this quiet yet resolute manner.

The point where the narrow valley divided, each branch being of about equal width and smoothness, was reached. And halting for a few moments, Captain Kidd pointed out the best cover for his assassin to make use of.

This was a patch of vines and bushes, growing at the point of rocks which, like a wedge, extended from the high hills beyond, splitting the valley into the shape of a gigantic letter Y.

"If he comes this far, he'll be at a loss which arm to take," the captain hastily explained in a low, guarded tone. "He can't tell that unless by hunting for hoof-tracks. If he does that, he'll come close enough for a sure shot. See that you make it sure, old man!"

"He'll never pass here alive," grimly nodded the ruffian.

"Make sure of it. Don't leave him until you've riddled him, through and through. Don't take anything for granted. Understand?"

"I'll bring you his head, if you'd rather, cap'n!"

"Do it—and if it's the head of either of those two devils, I'll give you a couple of hundred chucks extra!" viciously flashed the arch-villain, reaching out a gloved hand as though to clinch the bargain.

After that hand-shake, Captain Kidd sent the extra horses on in advance, following after them with his fair captive, who had spoken no word for many minutes past, seemingly content to await an explanation until her conductor saw fit to offer one.

When something like half a mile had been covered, Captain Kidd caught the loose horses, tying them to stout saplings growing near the trail, then abruptly turned to the right, entering a broken, rough, difficult piece of ground, affording far different traveling from the valley which he had deserted.

When fairly out of sight of the valley, he halted, and sat in an attitude of intent listening. Only for a few moments. He had calculated closely, for there came floating to his ears the faint echo of a pistol-shot.

"Good boy, Daniel!" he cried, bursting into a laugh that fairly chilled the blood of the girl sitting close at hand. "That makes one bitter enemy the less for you, Miss Mather!"

"What do you mean, sir?" the maiden faltered. "I don't understand. Why have you forced me to leave?"

"The house of your deadliest enemy?" quickly interposed Captain Kidd, his dark eyes glittering as he leaned forward to gaze into that pale face. "Did the cunning devil fool you so completely, Miss Mather? Did his hardly less evil-hearted confederate so wholly impose upon your innocence? Did you really swallow all the lies that fat hypocrite told you?"

"Do you—not Mr. Terry and his mother?"

"Mother!" sneered the road-agent, but checking himself and once more pressing on. "We'll soon be where I can explain more fully the awful snare into which you have so blindly been lured, Miss Mather."

The maiden made no reply. She was bewildered by his confident manner of speaking, yet she could not believe that motherly Mrs. King was of an evil character.

For another half-hour that ride lasted, and when Captain Kidd drew rein and sprang lightly from his saddle, May Mather gazed about her with doubting wonder.

"Did you expect to bring up at a palace, Miss Mather?" laughed her escort, as he held up his arms to assist her from the saddle. "Are you looking for a hotel with all modern conveniences?"

"But—I see not even a hut!" stammered the poor girl, more thoroughly bewildered than ever, those vague yet dreadful fears beginning to take clearer shape as she gazed quickly around when her feet were fairly feeling firm ground once more.

"Because we have not yet reached our destination, my dear," laughed the villain, having quickly knotted the long reins together, thus guarding against either animal straying far away. "Because I felt that you surely needed a little rest, and while taking it I can explain all that may seem odd to you in this little adventure."

As he spoke, he slipped an arm about her waist, only to have her slip swiftly out of his

embrace, her face showing pale as death, her dark eyes flashing with indignation as she confronted him bravely.

"You call yourself my friend, yet you dare—"

"I have dared far more than you realize as yet, Miss Mather," the outlaw quickly interposed, but making no effort to replace his arm. "I have risked my life by trying to serve you. I have won the undying enmity of at least two score bloodthirsty villains by taking you away from the house of Penn Terry, as he calls himself—a road-agent, outlaw, murderer, as the law has branded him under his rightful name!"

"You frighten me!" gasped May, starting back with a shiver. "And yet—I cannot believe it! Why should you risk so much for me, a complete stranger?"

"Because I love you, darling!" impulsively cried the ruffian, with a sudden spring catching her in his arms and clasping her tightly to his bosom, that coarse beard chafing her flushing face as he attempted to press her lips with his vile mouth. "Because I would give—"

They were near a frost-eaten rock, and as May struggled for freedom, her hand touched this. Then, in utter desperation she lifted a fair-sized bit of the rock, striking him heavily in the face, and staggering back, losing his hold on her, he fell headlong into a narrow rift.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SHOWS WHAT THE SNARE CAUGHT.

ONCE again did Sandy Sands's proverbial good fortune stand by him, for though he fell in a heap at the crack of that pistol, the lead itself did no worse harm than to help remove his hat, unsettled by the vigorous effort which he made to save himself a fall and escape injury from the loose stone as it turned under his foot.

But that very awkwardness only made his fall seem more life-like, and Dan Dillon uttered a wild yell of savage triumph as he saw his dangerous target go down in a heap.

Not for a moment did he doubt the complete success of his aim, and though he told himself that he would make all perfectly sure by emptying the entire contents of his weapon into the body, as soon as his first shot should bring down the game, he forgot that very prudent resolution in his devilish exultation.

"Down for keeps, and I'm the patent hammer that says so!" he yelled out as he broke cover, flourishing his still smoking revolver, but changing it to his left hand as he drew a knife. "Head comes, cap'n, and them ducats are mine to—"

Not until he was actually falling, did the Sharp from Snap City realize that the trap for which he had been looking ever since those rocky hills were reached, was located at that point. But he saw that red spout of flame, and the lead twitched his hair viciously as it just missed his skull. And knowing that he could not recover his balance sufficiently to either make a charge or leap aside to cover without laying himself open to other and more accurate shots, he had the nerve to lie as he had fallen, hoping for some such break as Dillon actually made a single breath later.

Before his body fairly touched the ground, his fingers were tightly gripping a pistol-butt, and the last movement of his head was to leave his right arm free for use.

He heard that savage cry. He saw Dan Dillon spring out of his covert. He caught the words spoken by the triumphant ruffian, and naturally believed the burly gambler was calling back to his master when he promised him that head.

Only for that belief, Sandy Sands would have attempted to capture the rascal, but with another and even more dangerous enemy close at hand, such an effort would be little less than suicidal.

And so it was that Daniel Dillon never finished that sentence; a hand rose slightly, a spout of flame-tinged smoke nearly touched his person, and with a choking, hideous sound, he flung up his arms and fell backward, shot through the body!

At the same instant Sandy Sands sprung to his feet and made two swift bounds, the last of which carried him into the bushes almost at the point where Dillon had broken cover, his voice ringing out clearly:

"Speak, May Mather! I come to save you! I'm Sands, of Snap City!"

He was using both eyes and ears at the same time, with weapons in readiness for backing up his words. He fully expected a shot or a blow from Captain Kidd, but if it was not instantly fatal, he knew he would have ample revenge, and that the maiden would be freed from her enemy.

But there came no answer to his cry. All was still, save the one gasping, gurgling groan which came from that quivering mass of evil lying out yonder in the clear moonlight.

Sandy Sands divined the truth, but he crashed rapidly through the narrow fringe of vine-clad bushes, making sure that the road-agent was not in hiding with his captive, before abandoning his first belief.

He paused when at the end of the cover, sweeping keen glances around, but so far as such

a hasty inspection could decide, there was no cover close at hand sufficiently dense or extensive enough to conceal the horse which he had been following.

"The cunning devil has kept on, leaving that cur to check me here! But—which arm did he take?"

That was the difficulty, and in hopes of solving it in a single breath, the Sharp sprung to the side of Dan Dillon, grasping an arm and shaking him roughly as he sternly demanded:

"Which arm, you dog? Tell me—"

Not even a groan came in response. And though life still lingered in that body, Sandy Sands saw that the fellow was unconscious, if not actually dying.

He was quite as merciful as the average run of his sex, but he never gave a thought to trying to restore the outlaw to life. He dropped that nerveless arm, and bending low, quartered the ground like a fox-hound trying to pick up a lost scent.

Captain Kidd had chosen his ground with rare shrewdness, and a more favorable point for breaking a trail and throwing an enemy off the scent, could hardly have been found in a long day's ride through those hills.

The ground was hard and dry. There was little soil, in fact, the surface being little more than a sheet of coarse gravel, mixed with shale, over which a score of horsemen might have passed without leaving a single sign plain enough to be recognized by the keenest of eyes, aided by the light of the moon and stars alone.

Sandy Sands quickly realized this, but he dared not lose more time, even in hopes of making sure which arm of the valley his game had selected. His only hope lay in again catching sight or sound of the kidnapper, and so, mentally praying that he was not going astray, he took the right-hand arm, dashing along the comparatively level stretch with a speed that was fairly marvelous, considering all that he had undergone since the last setting of the sun.

He ran as an Indian runs, with hardly more jar or sound than that made by a velvet-footed animal. And all the time his eyes were sweeping the ground before him, with many keen flashes sent into the rocks on either hand; all the time his ears were strained in hopes of catching the thud of hoof-strokes, or the sharp clink of iron against stone.

He raced up the valley for fully a mile, without a pause or a break, feeling confident that if Captain Kidd had taken this course, and was in hiding among the rocks, he would not resist the temptation to rid himself of such a dangerous and persistent foe by dropping him with a pistol or a rifle-ball.

Most men would have shrunk from such a deadly risk, but with nearly every stride he made, Sandy Sands prayed for just such an opening.

"I'd have time to make sure of him, and that would set the poor child free!" he reasoned.

Then he came to a spot where a spring of considerable volume broke forth from the left hand side of the valley, its waters nearly crossing the level, and making a tract of moist ground over which no horseman could hope to pass without leaving ample evidence behind.

But though Sandy Sands gave the tract a thorough examination, not the slightest trace of such a passage could he find. And as he was forced to the conclusion that he had indeed taken the wrong arm of the natural "Y," he grew grimly cool once more.

"Your trick, Captain Kidd!" he muttered, as he dropped down close to where the cool water gushed from beneath the mossy rock. "Make the most of it, for the next one shall be mine!"

He bathed his face, saturating his hair thoroughly, for his brain felt hot and was throbbing heavily. He wet his wrists until his pulse grew less rapid, then bent over and took a sup of the grateful water.

He dared not swallow as much as his heated blood craved, for he knew that his stomach was still weak from the effects of the chloroform, and there was more hard work ahead of him.

All of this took but comparatively little time, and though he had a fierce longing to get at the villain who had committed such a dastardly outrage, Sandy Sands knew that the time was by no means wasted. He had raced long and covered much ground, and he required at least so much breathing space.

Nevertheless, within ten minutes from the moment when he dropped down by the spring, the Sharp was on his feet again, his immediate plans clearly understood.

"Over the range to the other arm!" he muttered, sweeping a keen glance along that forbidding prospect. "Tough work, maybe, but I can make it quicker than by going all the way back and forward."

In that belief he took one more moderate sup of water, then buckled down to hard work, scaling the rugged range like a born mountaineer.

But as he neared the backbone, he began to believe that he would have fared better and made quicker time by retracing his steps and keeping on the level. Several times he was forced to search for an easier crossing, where deep rifts, too wide to leap over, barred his way.

But as often did he succeed, then kept on with limbs that seemed tireless.

At length he reached the highest point of rocks, and instinctively his eyes turned in the direction of New Dorado. No difficulty in deciding on the proper direction. That ugly red reflection was too plain for an error!

"The whole town must be going!" he muttered, breathing hard and fast, for the last struggle had been a tough one. "All his work—curse him from crown to sole!"

Time was too precious for him to spend many moments in watching that distant fire, and he began his descent, aiming for the other arm of the natural Y. And as he did so, he could not check a sigh of regret.

"If I'd only brought Spider-web along! If he could only have taken one arm, while I took the other!"

Even as he gave expression to that regret, Sandy Sands knew that the detective could never have "lived the pace" after his terrible experience with the chloroformers. Yet he could not help wishing—if it only might have been.

Although the waste before him was generally a descent, Sandy Sands found hardly less difficulty in advancing. The tract was fearfully rough, and at times he could scarcely make his way at a walk, much less by running. And as the minutes sped by, he repeatedly cursed his folly in trying to save time by taking a "short cut."

Long before this he knew he could have doubled the spur of rocks, and possibly have again picked up the lost trail. Now, he had but one hope to keep his spirits up—daybreak was not very far away, and with its aid he surely would be able to recover the lost trail.

The moon was far away in the western heavens, and its beams seemed less brilliant than they had been, and the Sharp felt that she would be of slight service to him by the time he reached the valley which he could now quite distinctly trace ahead and below him. The light was uncertain where he was now stopping to catch a full breath; down yonder it would be little better than nothing.

He pressed on with grim resolution, resolved to make the best of a bad bargain, and finally reached the valley, where a ray of hope seemed to greet him at last.

The ground seemed higher than in the other arm, and was of softer nature, grass growing in little patches here and there, indicating a soil such that no horse could pass over it for many yards without leaving unmistakable signs behind.

With quickened hope Sands bent low over the ground, searching for hoof-prints which would prove the kidnapper had passed that way with his captive; but all in vain. Even when aided by a torch of dry grass and bunched twigs, he failed to make any such discovery, and at length he was forced to believe that Captain Kidd had not passed that point on horseback, if at all.

That fact narrowed the space to be searched, but at the same time it doubled the chances against finding either captor or captive by tracking them. No trail would lie for a moment among those rocks.

Hoping against hope, searching as he passed along, Sandy Sands turned back toward the point where he had been ambushed by Dan Dillon. At intervals he paused to carefully hunt for hoof-prints in moist or soft ground, but after a while the surface grew dry and stony, like that of its fellow arm, along which he had first raced.

He passed the point where Captain Kidd had tied the extra horses, but they were gone, and he never suspected their having been there. He made no discovery worth recording, until at the junction of the twin arms; but there a surprise awaited him.

Dan Dillon was gone!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FROM WORSE THAN DEATH.

MAY MATHER had struck blindly, hardly knowing what it was she held in her hand, or what its effect might be, for she was terribly agitated.

More from those evilly glowing eyes than from his words, she read the terrible peril which menaced her, and she thought only of struggling to the bitter end.

The blow was a heavy one, and Captain Kidd staggered back before it, losing his grasp about the maiden's waist, flinging up his hands in trying to recover his balance.

He might have succeeded in this, had his heel not caught against a point of rock as he flung his foot back. That completed his downfall, and with a mad curse of rage, he toppled over backward, to fall headforemost into a narrow rift between the rocks.

This crevice was not deep, growing closer together as it went down, and had it been a little wider, Captain Kidd would have suffered but slight harm or inconvenience. As it was, his burly figure was wedged in between the rocks, and this gave the terrified maiden at least a chance to escape by flight.

Poor May knew naught of all this. The instant she dealt that despairing blow and felt her-

self free from that loathsome grasp, she turned and ran away, knowing nothing of what perils might lie before her, fearing only the perils she thus left behind.

She ran on as swiftly as the nature of the ground would permit, expecting with each passing moment to hear that wicked wretch leaping after her. And such was the awful fears which his unlooked for words and actions had inspired, she dared not even glance back to see if she was holding her own. On, still on! Oh, if she had but the wings of a bird in that hour of peril!

She tripped, she stumbled, she even fell, cutting her poor hands and bruising her person badly enough to have crippled her movements under less terrible excitement; but as often she scrambled up and pressed on once more, thinking only of flight. She would run until she dropped down with fatigue.

For the third time the frightened girl fell, and a low, sobbing moan escaped from her parched lips as she tried to arise and press on. All at once, as it seemed, her limbs failed her and she was weak as an infant. It was overtaken nature taking its revenge.

She turned her head in the direction from which she had come, expecting to behold that evil villain rushing upon her; but she could distinguish nothing more dangerous than frowning rocks, with here and there a stunted evergreen, or a bunch of half-dead bushes.

There was a little clump of these only a little way to one side of where she lay, a hardy vine having crept up their stems and formed a sort of canopy at their tops.

Since flight had failed her, another instinct came in its place, and half-walking, half-crawling, the poor girl made her way to this frail refuge, cowering in its shade, trying to still her wildly-throbbing heart lest its tumultuous beating betray her presence to that loathsome pursuer.

Even as minute after minute passed by without bringing sight of Captain Kidd, May could not believe that she had actually escaped from him. She tried to close her eyes that she might not see his coming one instant earlier than must be, but even that poor solace was denied her.

As often as she closed them, the aching lids would fly open, and she would be looking for her abductor.

And then, after such a lapse of time that, had she been in anything like her natural condition, she must have known he was searching entirely at random, Captain Kidd actually appeared, though so far away that had not his dark figure been outlined against the sky-line in close proximity to the bright moon, even her terror-sharpened eyes could not have recognized him as aught human in shape.

If she had been cooler, and looked intently, she might even have seen that his back was turned toward her. If she had delayed even for half a score seconds, she would have seen him step down from the boulder from the top of which he was gazing around in hopes of catching sight of his intended victim. But the poor child was far too badly frightened for anything of the kind.

She only knew that her enemy was in sight, and she fancied that he was rushing straight for her present hiding-place. And with a fictitious strength lent by that fear, she sprang out of the vine-topped bushes and fled at top speed.

If Captain Kidd had been looking in that direction, he might possibly have caught sight of that fleeing figure, though it had a background of gray rocks not much different in color from the linen ulster which she had donned at his command. As it was, each moment carried them further apart.

It was a blind, unreasoning flight on May's part, and it lasted as long as her false powers held out. Then, panting, gasping, her throat burning and feeling as though she was breathing powdered ashes, her limbs feeling as though they were being wrenched off, she sunk down, to pant for a while, then to fall into a merciful stupor which at least would bring much needed rest to her body.

How long she lay thus, May Mather never knew, but the moon was just sinking behind the western hills when she roused up, staring around her with a dazed, bewildered air that told she failed as yet to remember all that had occurred, or where she then was.

Not for long. A wolf sent up its lugubrious howl far away in the hills, and the girl sprang to her feet with a choking cry of terror as memory returned. She knew, now, and she staggered away through the rocks as rapidly as her stiffened limbs would carry her.

She had taken that howl for the voice of Captain Kidd shouting to her, but at its repetition, more distinctly heard if no nearer than before, she recognized the truth. But wild animals had no such terror for her mind as had that beast in human shape, and she instinctively turned her face in that direction. Poor child! She dimly reasoned that her enemy would hardly expect to find her in such wild company.

But presently her further progress in that direction was barred by a crevice too wide for crossing, and May turned aside, naturally taking the way which led downward, though the slope was not abrupt. In her weary state it was to be expected that she would select the

easiest course, and it was providential that this should lead her to physical if not mental relief.

She had not covered more than half a mile more of that difficult journey, before she came to a little valley, or gulch, down the middle of which ran a little brook of cold water. It had its birth only a few rods further up the hollow, but May never thought of searching for the mountain spring. She lay down and greedily satisfied her thirst.

Almost immediately thereafter a languid, sleepy indifference took the place of her wild fears, and only taking time to creep back to the shelter of an overhanging rock, she fell fast asleep.

This repose was vastly different from that stupor which had held her spellbound during the earlier part of her blind flight, and though it was fated not to last as long as it should to perfect her physical restoration, with each minute thus spent she was growing fitter to encounter the trials and sorrows which fate might have in store.

The moon had long since sunk out of sight. The night passed away, giving place to dawn. The shadows were slowly chased out of that little gulch, and still May Mather slumbered peacefully, all her sorrows, all her fears forgotten for the time being.

But long before she would have awakened if left to herself, she was roused, with a start. A fragment of the frost-eaten ledge under which she had crept, dropped down and struck her shoulder with force sufficient to break the chains of slumber.

With a low cry May started up, pressing her temples with both hands as she stared bewilderedly about her. Then—she remembered!

That old fear returned, and she shrunk cowering to the rock as she gazed around, fearing to behold that horrible wretch; but then, as she saw and heard nothing to confirm her dread, May gradually rallied her nerves, and began to think of completing her escape.

She knew of only one place where she might expect aid and protection, and that was the town from whence that villain had stolen her.

While wondering how she could find her way back to this, May washed her hands and face, then took a long draught of the clear, cold water. It was both food and drink to her, poor child!

She studied over her situation for a few minutes, then started up the high rocks above where she had slept, knowing that her only hope of ever finding her way out of that barren wilderness of rocks lay in extending her view as much as possible, though she hardly dared hope to catch a glimpse of the town itself.

Feeling far more like her old-time self, she climbed the rocks quite rapidly, soon gaining the highest point in that vicinity, but before she had swept half the prospect spread around, a cry of terror escaped her lips as she caught sight of a horseman, who seemed to see her at the same moment. For he leaped from the saddle and rushed toward her.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A SHORT CAMPAIGN.

THE Sharp's first instinct was to look around in quest of the man whom he had caught in his own trap, thinking that he might have recovered sufficiently to drag himself to the nearest cover, obeying the wild-beast's instincts which almost invariably go hand-in-hand with crime and violent passions.

Even as he acted on that idea, a far more probable solution of the mystery occurred to him, and when his hasty search showed him neither the body nor signs of its having been dragged over the ground, he felt convinced that, in this case at least, second thoughts are best.

"Talk about luck!" he muttered, with an air of utter disgust at himself, his enemies and the world in general, as he abandoned the search and stood staring down at the dimly visible patch of blood-stained shingle marking the point where Dan Dillon had dropped to his shot. "Did ever mortal man have such another crooked streak? A snake-fence couldn't begin to touch it!"

He believed that Captain Kidd had taken the other arm of the divided valley, leaving his man in ambush to check their daring pursuer, while he himself formed a second line of defense, as it were: lying in wait to deal another blow in case the one in chase should succeed in passing Dillon by without serious injury.

"Then, when neither of us turned up, he just rode back this way and loaded up his carrion, taking the back-track to hunt another path out of the valley!"

So Sandy Sands reasoned, mixing truth with error; but in no other way could he explain his complete failure to pick up the broken trail.

Acting on this belief, the Sharp lingered no longer at the division of the valley, but made all haste along the back track, keeping a close watch for a trail, as well as an eye to either side of the valley to note any likely point for a horseman to turn aside into the hills where pursuit might not be so easy.

He discovered only one point where such an escape was at all probable, and a short inspec-

tion by the dim light partly satisfied him that no such diversion had been made by the road-agent.

He made this examination by the last lingering light of the moon, and then hastened on, doggedly resolute though beginning to feel the effects of his travels on an empty stomach.

The east was growing lighter, and when he came to a patch of ground over which he knew that horses could not be ridden without leaving ample signs, he halted long enough for that light to strengthen.

"No more guess-work, clumsy!" he grimly muttered, giving himself a new title, but one which he felt was most appropriate. "I headed him off up yon' way. If he hasn't passed over this ground twice, then he's in the rocks, where it'll take the nose of a bloodhound to track him out!"

He greatly needed this respite, which would have been all the more beneficial could he have supplemented it with a few mouthful of solid food, to replace that lost through the action of the chloroform; but having nothing about his clothes more edible than a broken cigar, he patched that up with a green leaf, struck a match and made the most of it all.

With the first fair rays Sandy Sands was afoot once more, slowly, thoroughly quartering the ground, pausing only when fully assured that Captain Kidd had not passed over that portion of the valley for the second time that night.

There was no room left for doubt on this point. He could mark the trail leading toward the "Y" without the slightest difficulty. He could even pick out his own footprints where he had followed in chase. But not a track led back in the direction of town!

"It's hard on you, May," he muttered, giving up the last hope of recovering the lost trail at that point, "but there's no use in blinking the plain truth. That devil has taken to the hills with you, and no single man can hope to find him, unless through pure chance!"

He cast a look backward, doubting whether or no he had not best return to that possible path out of the valley, and give it another examination now that he had more light; but this lasted but a moment.

"What if I did find it? How far could I follow it through those infernal rocks? I've got to have something to travel on, and the sooner I'm fitted out for a regular campaign, the better for all concerned—all but Captain Kidd and his imps!"

He gave those words an almost vicious emphasis. It spoke quite as eloquently as could the fiercest of vows, and if the arch-villain who called them forth could have seen that face, or heard those words, he might have been better prepared for the final struggle.

Satisfied that the kidnapper was behind him, and knowing that the lost trail could only be picked up between those two points, Sandy Sands bent all his energies to reaching New Dorado, where he could procure food and enlist help.

He was in too reckless a mood to think of or care for enemies who might be going to join their chief, their dastardly work finished when the night gave place to the light of a new day. If he had thought of such a meeting, it would have given him a certain grim delight—nothing more serious than that.

He reached the lower end of the valley, then struck boldly through the hills, no longer trying to keep to the trail by which Captain Kidd had led him, but noting the point where New Dorado lay, then keeping as straight a line as the nature of the ground would admit.

By this means he wasted no time, and the sun was hardly in sight when he emerged from the rocks, with a comparatively level stretch of ground before him.

The first sign of town that met his eyes was the house of Fenn Terry, and almost unconsciously he gave a sigh of relief as he caught sight of the square roof with its tiny cupola. For, despite the doggedly maintained suspicions of Webb Tennant, Sands felt sure that in the mine-owner he would find his truest, strongest, most ready ally in the stern campaign which he was projecting at that moment.

Thanks to the intervening trees, he had some little distance to cover before he could see more than the roof of the building; but when once past these natural screens, he gave a low ejaculation of grim delight.

A number of men were hurrying to and fro, and he could distinguish horses standing near, prepared for the road. Almost certainly the daring abduction had been discovered, and Fenn Terry was about starting in chase.

"Save so much time, anyway!" he grimly laughed, as he quickened his lagging pace, that sight seeming to act as a tonic. "Terry's got a gang together, and with the start I can give them, they'd ought to let a fellow have time enough to swallow at least one bite of old cow!"

The bare thought sharpened his appetite so keenly that Sandy Sands tried to run away from it!

As he drew nearer to the building, he recognized not only Fenn Terry, but Webb Tennant

as well; but only the detective came hurrying forward in answer to his shout.

"More like a walking ghost than ever, pardner!" laughed the Sharp as he noted those sunken cheeks and cavernous eyes. "Threw up all but your frame-work and its covering, didn't ye?"

"The girl's gone, and—" hurriedly began the detective, but the Snap City sport cut him short.

"And you've enlisted for the war? Under Fenn Terry, too?"

A contortion which answered for a laugh, twisted up those bony features for an instant, then subsided, leaving it harder, more like the face of a mummy than aught else. And the detective quickly answered:

"Why not? Who can find so well as he who hides?"

"Still harping on that old string, Spider?"

"It gives back the right note, Mr. Sands."

"To your ear, perhaps, but not to mine. Terry had no finger in this pie. I ought to know, for if I didn't actually watch its baking, I was there when the chief cook took it out of the oven and ran off to let it cool enough for eating!"

"Then you know something about—"

"How it feels to become a cannibal, Spider?" laughed Sands, pushing by the walking skeleton and hastening toward the house. "I just do! And if anything more than a bundle of bones had come out to meet me, I'd be giving the world an elegant illustration of the problem how to put one human being inside of another!"

"If you know—don't tell Terry *too much*!" warned Tennant, as he followed after his comrade, who seemed only less obstinate than himself on that particular point: the identity of Captain Kidd.

As he neared the house, Sandy Sands cast a quick, searching glance over the force which the mine-owner had collected for the purpose of hunting for and punishing the ruffians who had abducted Miss Mather and treated his mother with such brutality. He knew that half their number might owe allegiance to Captain Kidd, though he had no means of justifying this suspicion at present.

He met Terry almost on the threshold, just coming forth to take horse and away; but he coolly interposed his muscular form, saying:

"Have pity on a starving critter, Mr. Terry, and tell him the nearest route to your pantry."

"Go in—help yourself to what you can find. I've no time to waste on such matters, sir, for—"

"And while I'm eating I'll tell you where's the best point to pick up the trail of Captain Kidd," added the Sharp, smiling broadly at the start his words provoked.

"What do you mean? What do you know about—Curse it, man!" with sudden fury as he caught Sands by the shoulders. "Did you take any part in this outrage? Speak, or I'll tear your tongue out!"

"Nothing worse than chasing Captain Kidd and Miss Mather from the moment he carried her out of this door, pardner. But if you want to hear my story, you've got to pay for it in good solid grub. I'm hollow as an echo, and couldn't speak a word to save your life!"

Those eyes, more than that glib tongue, convinced Terry that this man held important information, and as the shortest method of getting at it, he led the way into the dining-room, dumping a miscellaneous lot of cold food before him, and begged him to tell what he knew.

And between mouthfuls Sandy Sands complied, "boiling it down" as much as he could without seriously impairing the interest of his recital. Then, seemingly only thinking of the young lady when she should be found and rescued, he asked if Dr. Kemper couldn't be added to their working force?

"I haven't seen him since the fire broke out. He must have been called out of town to attend some patient," was the impatient reply.

Sands nodded as though accepting that explanation, but he was recording a far different conclusion.

While eating, he learned that the fire had been checked by blowing up and tearing down a number of buildings, thus saving the greater and more valuable portion of the town. That the abduction was not discovered until Terry returned home, just at daybreak, his first intimation of serious trouble being when he almost stumbled over the corpse of Pierre Chenault, killed by his own knife, which remained sticking in his throat. That he found his mother, half-dead from fear and suffocation, and finally learned from her how May Mather had been carried away.

Her description of the man who seemed to take the lead answered closely to that given of Captain Kidd, and fearing the worst, Terry had hastened to raise a force to look for the trail.

"Furnish me with a mount, and I'll guide you to the point where I lost the track," said Sands, rising satisfied from the table.

This was quickly done, and the party started out at a rapid trot; but the campaign was fated to be a remarkably short one.

They had just gained the edge of the broken ground, when Sands, who was riding in the

front, with Terry at his side, wrenched up his horse, and gave a sharp cry as he pointed along the base of the hills.

"Look! there she is—and a man with her!"

CHAPTER XXX.

HOW IT ALL CAME ABOUT.

So far away that it was little less than a marvel that they were detected at all before the searching-party had passed into the hills, a horse and rider were visible. And by close scrutiny it was seen that another figure was walking by the side of the horse, though only a few of those with sharpest eyes could pronounce with certainty that a lady sat on the horse, and a man walked by her side.

Even then their identity could be little more than guess-work, but the Sharp from Snap City seemed to have no doubts, for he gave his horse free rein, riding swiftly in that direction, at the same time taking a hasty look at his revolver, like one who saw a possibility of having to use it on short notice.

Though Sandy Sands was the first to start, Fenn Terry was the one to first come within fair speaking distance of the couple, his black horse with comparative ease distancing all others.

"Look out, pardner!" called the Sharp in hasty warning as the mine-owner passed him by. "He's growing scarey! Cut him off if he tries to dodge into the rocks!"

There was some foundation for this fear. The man turned the horse toward the rocks, sending it off with a slap on the haunch, while he moved forward a few paces in the direction of the body of riders, and acted as though he meant to stand at bay, covering her retreat as long as one man could with such terrible odds against him.

If Fenn Terry heard that warning, he certainly showed no signs of acting upon it, for after a few more leaps of his horse, he rose in his stirrups, swinging his hat high in the air as he shouted:

"We're friends, Kemper! Tell Miss Mather it's all right!"

Sandy Sands smiled grimly as he caught those words.

"Her friends, all right enough; but how about *him*?" he muttered, his old suspicions only strengthened by this discovery.

Where had Dr. Kemper been all last night? How came he to join company—as his natural self—with May Mather?

"You've got to answer all that, my fine fellow!" mentally vowed the Sharp as he galloped on to where Terry and Kemper were now moving in company toward the still frightened maiden. "You've got to! whether you know it at the time or not!"

He drew his horse down to a walk as he saw that there was no appearance of flight or attempted evasion, Terry leaping from his steed to clasp both May's hands, shaking them ardently, his dark eyes betraying far more than he intended, just then.

"It cuts, does it, doctor?" thought Sands, as he keenly watched that grave face grow stern and hard. "It's a mighty risky game you're playing, and maybe you'd have been wiser to have stuck to the hills!"

"Plays it right up to the nines, don't he?" breathed a guarded voice in Sandy's ear, as Webb Tennant rode up alongside.

"I've seen worse acting in my time," assented the Sharp, but each speaker had a different actor in view.

By this time the entire party had come up, and many were the questions poured out upon the doctor from all sides; but he showed no particular desire to gratify their curiosity.

"There's little to tell on my side," he curtly responded, addressing no person in particular. "I simply happened to find Miss Mather by a most fortunate chance. The lady can explain such other points as she may deem best."

"He saved me from starvation, if no worse fate!" impulsively cried May at this. "I was lost among those horrid rocks! I knew not which way to turn for help. Then—he found me!"

Her voice faltered and grew husky as she recalled all she had suffered, and Terry quickly attempted a diversion which would draw attention from the poor girl, for a time at least.

"You must tell us more, doctor!" and he caught a hand between his, pressing and shaking it ardently. "You must go back with us, and stop for a bite and sup, for—"

"Some other time, Mr. Terry," was the cold response, as he freed his hand and turned his eyes toward town. "What was the fire last night? Was my office among those lost?"

Half a dozen voices assured him that he had suffered no loss by the fire, and then the entire party moved toward town.

There was abundance of food for talk, and though Terry did his best to shield May, who he saw was worn and weary, he could not entirely succeed, though he told his men that they should have the whole story when his house was reached.

When they reached the turn, Dr. Kemper started away from the rest, seemingly too eager to reach his office to think of his horse, which May Mather was still riding; but neither Sands

nor Terry would listen to such an unceremonious parting—he must go to the house and break his fast, even if he took nothing more than a cup of coffee.

His strong, dark face grew darker as he declined to yield, and more than ever the Sharp felt sure he had something to conceal—if not on his person, in his mind.

Terry whispered a word to May, and she attempted what all others had failed to accomplish, bending low in the saddle and speaking with earnestness:

"Will you not—to oblige me, Dr. Kemper? I have not had time to half thank you, and—"

"I have done nothing to deserve thanks, Miss Mather. The debt is on my side, if debt there be."

"Since you decline me as a friend, will you not accept me as a patient?" persisted May, forcing a smile as she gazed into those dark, magnetic eyes, instead of recoiling from them, as she felt strongly inclined. "I fear I shall be ill, after so much excitement, and if you—"

"Since you put it on those grounds, Miss Mather, I must yield," was his slow, reluctant response.

"Anyway, just so we get you there, doctor!" laughed Terry, who was almost beside himself with excitement and joy over this speedy and happy ending to what had promised to be a bitter tragedy.

The house was gained, and while the majority of the party remained on the outside, a number entered. Terry pressed several of the men who knew most about cooking, into service, and sending May to her chamber in care of Mrs. King, he took charge of the culinary preparations.

By the time an abundance of hot coffee, with plenty of substantial were ready, the ladies descended to preside over the table.

Terry sent the amateur cooks outside with plenty of supplies for the little army he had gathered together, then the others sat down to break their fast, Sandy Sands eating as heartily as any of the rest, despite his recent attack on the larder.

But curiosity was fully as great as hunger, and Dr. Kemper was soon urged to tell his share of the story.

"There is very little to tell, fortunately for all of us," was his response. "I was called out of town, last night, to visit a miner over on Policy Branch, by his partner, who seemed half frightened to death. He declared that his mate was lying at the point of death, and was so excited that he could hardly wait for me to get horse or medicine case."

"As some of you know, it's a long ride and a hard one. It took me until late to get there, and though I noticed the red glow on the sky over town, my guide would not hear to my returning, or even lingering by the way to estimate the probable amount of damage there was doing."

"I was on my way back, when I caught sight of a lady's figure on a point of rocks, and to my great wonder I recognized Miss Mather. I called out, and started toward her, but she fled like one frightened."

"As I surely was," with a faint, wan smile. "I took you for none other than that evil wretch, Captain Kidd!"

"I managed to reassure Miss Mather, and turning one stirrup over my saddle, I made it sufficiently like the feminine convenience to induce her to intrust herself on my horse. Then—you met us."

"Dr. Kemper says nothing of all his care and kindness to a poor, weak, frightened girl," said May, with tears dimming her eyes, and a quivering lip that told how great must have been her trials before she caught a ray of hope. "I have not been able to thank him for that, as yet. I pray that the time may come when I can do so, fitly!"

"I am more than repaid by that very prayer, Miss Mather."

"And your patient—what did you call him, doctor?" asked Sands.

"Todd Overflow. I don't think I mentioned his name at all," was the curt, even cold response.

"He was alive when you got there, I hope?" with an air of solicitude, which he explained a moment later: "Because, if he hadn't sent for you, Miss Mather might not have been found so readily, you know!"

Dr. Kemper hesitated a little before answering. And Sandy Sands took mental note of the flush which tinged his bronzed cheeks.

"He was living—yes. In fact," with a short, peculiar laugh, "he never was in danger, though his mate seemed frightened out of his wits, thinking it was a case of accidental poison, instead of simple colic."

"All the same, I'm mighty glad to hear he's still alive!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

A SISTER'S PILGRIMAGE.

DR. KEMPER gazed steadily into the face of the Sharp for a few moments after that hearty exclamation, as though he began to suspect a deeper meaning than lay on the surface; but he

only saw honesty itself in that handsome face, those dark-gray eyes.

With a slight shrug of his broad shoulders, he turned away, opening his medicine-case at a side-table, quickly preparing a simple nerve for Miss Mather. As he told her, quiet and rest would do more for her than all medicines. And when she tried once more to thank him, he cut her words short by a formal bow, leaving the house as though he was glad to get away from it and its occupants.

Sandy Sands followed him outside, giving him a hearty good-by as he mounted his horse; then took it upon himself to repeat the account given by the doctor to the party who remained outside.

There was a good deal more fire and force in his story than the doctor had shown in giving an account of his meeting with May Mather, and Sandy seemed so enthused by the lucky accident, that no one seemed surprised at his asking questions in regard to the patient whose illness had called Dr. Kemper out of town so opportunely.

The Sharp had little difficulty in learning all he wished on that score, for several of the men present seemed very well acquainted with Todd Overflow and his partner James McKee. And before Sandy went back to the room where the rescued girl was sitting, with Mrs. King, Fenn Terry, Webb Tennant, and one or two others, he knew pretty well where to find Policy Creek, and about what portion of the stream Overflow and McKee had located their claims.

The sense of being once more in safety, surrounded by true friends on whose sympathy she could rely, was already working wonders, and though the shadow of that terrible shock still hung over her, May Mather was beginning to rally, looking more like her natural self than at any time since Tol Farrar blurted out the news of Social Sam's suicide.

Mrs. King was begging May to relate her adventures, and tell how she managed to escape from that evil villain's clutches. Terry ventured to oppose this wish, though his own face betrayed strong curiosity.

"Wait, mother," he said, just as Sandy entered the room. "Miss Mather needs rest and quiet. Think of all she must have suffered—oh, I'd give my right hand just for one square chance to get even with that infernal scoundrel!"

The ghost of a frown flitted across the face of the Sharp as he glanced quickly from one face to the other. The source of Terry's powerful emotion was easily enough read, but why should May flush so warmly and turn her face, with drooping eyes? Was it because she read the strong passion which showed itself in those dark eyes?

If so, it did not seem to either frighten or displease her.

"I don't believe it will harm Miss Mather to tell her story," the Sharp quietly chipped in. "And I'd really like to know how Captain Kidd contrived to give me the slip after placing his man in ambush."

May gave a little cry of surprise at this, regarding the Sharp with wakened interest; but Sandy Sands laughingly cut her eager questions short, promising to reveal all after she had told her story.

There is no need to repeat her words, since the account of her abduction has already been given the reader; but when told by her own lips, the narrative, broken and disjointed though it was, held her auditors spell-bound from first to last.

Sandy Sands nodded grimly as she told how Captain Kidd had left the arm of the valley for the rocks, where she made her escape from his clutches. He could understand now how he had missed the road-agent, thanks to his taking to the opposite side of the valley.

But the whole mystery was not yet solved, for surely Captain Kidd would not have so quickly abandoned his search for the maiden, as to remove those extra horses and carry off the body of Dan Dillon, all before he, the Sharp, could cross the back-bone and search the second arm. And making a mental note of this puzzling point, Sands listened to the further speech of the maiden.

There was little she could tell of her movements after escaping from the clutches of the road-agent. She looked back upon those hours of fear and suffering much as one might recall a frightful nightmare dream. And when she told how Dr. Kemper found her—how she at first believed it was Captain Kidd—how she had fled in horror until he overtook and made her understand that he meant her no ill: May paused, with an air of weariness.

"You must talk no more, Miss Mather," quickly uttered Terry, noting that drooping look. "Mother will—"

May lifted a hand with a gesture that cut his hurried speech short.

"You are very kind and thoughtful, dear sir, but I feel that I ought to explain—that you should know more about the poor girl whom you have given shelter."

"You honor us by accepting it!" impulsively cried Terry, his dark eyes glowing. "You are—I knew and loved your brother, Miss Mather,"

he added, in lower tones. "He was my friend. This house was his own if he had cared to use it. Why should you not find shelter here?"

There were tears in May's eyes as she listened, and her little hand trembled as it went out impulsively toward the speaker. She was moved by his kindly allusion to the brother whom she hardly knew; but that very fact rendered the shock she had received in finding him dead instead of living, one from which she could rally more speedily. After all, he had been but a brother in name.

"You are too weak and weary for more talk, my dear child," Terry murmured, pressing her hand between his, for the instant forgetting that other eyes were upon them; and only for the emphatic *ahem!* which came from Sandy Sands, there is no telling how far he might have gone.

"I am stronger than you think, Mr. Terry," smiled May through her tears as she glanced quickly around the room. "And as I am about to beg assistance in solving the—the manner in which my brother lost his life, I must tell you his and my story; from that alone you can read the motives of his—his enemies."

It was a harder task than she had thought at first, and her voice broke more than once while uttering those words. But then she rallied, and at once plunged into her strange story.

"Brother was nearly thirteen years older than I, and though there were other children, death claimed them, all but us two. When I was yet a little girl, mother died. And then—after several years—father married again."

"I think our step-mother intended well by us both, but unfortunately she was gifted with a very quick temper, and was of a highly nervous disposition. And brother was—was not as patient as he might have been," her voice lowering a little as she uttered those words.

Again Terry urged her to postpone her story until she had more fully recovered from the trials of the past night; but Sands said:

"I think it would be better for Miss Mather to continue, Terry. If we know all the points, we can guard her better from her enemies."

May seemed to agree to this conclusion, and resumed her recital.

She told how her brother and his step-mother failed to agree, and how, after many sad disputes, Sam ran away from home one dark night without leaving word or sign behind him. And long years passed before his relatives heard from him again.

"It was only indirectly, even then. An old friend of the family met him far out in the West; but he could tell us little more than that brother was well, and seemed to be prospering. And when father wrote to him, time and again, no word came in reply. The letters came back, and then the postmaster answered that Samuel had gone away, he could not say where."

"Mother died, shortly after that, and father followed her in less than a year. I had but one near relative left besides Samuel, my grandfather; and I was too weak to go to him at once. I was taken care of by an old friend of my father's, and I was still living with them when grandfather died."

"He had been a very wealthy man. He left a fortune of something like three millions, which was to be equally divided between brother and myself, provided we were both living at grandfather's death. If one had died, without leaving offspring, his or her share of the fortune was to revert to the survivor."

"And in case both were dead?" asked the Sharp, quickly.

"The money was to go to our next of kin—cousins, whom I had never met, to my knowledge."

"We'll stick a pin right there, and come back to those cousins after a bit!" softly laughed Sands, leaning easily back in his chair.

May flashed a puzzled glance toward him, but then resumed her story.

She told how the people with whom she lived tried to discover the long-missing brother, causing the fact of the will, with its provisions and the vast wealth awaiting its rightful heirs, to be published in all the more prominent newspapers, together with advertisements calling on Samuel Mather to make his present whereabouts known.

"But not a word came until nearly a year had elapsed, and we were almost convinced that brother had lost his life in some manner, when at last a letter, inclosing a card-size photograph, reached me. It was from my long-lost brother, stating that he had just happened across one of our advertisements."

"He said he was too deeply engaged in business to leave at once, but sent his picture as proof of his identity, and wished to learn more about the fortune and its conditions. He asked me to reply, directing to Amos Duprez, at Snap City."

"I did write, directing as he said, though I was puzzled to know why he had changed his name. I told him that I would quickly follow my letter, and sent him my picture that he might have no difficulty in recognizing me."

"Mr. Morrison, the friend with whom I had been living all this time, intended bearing me company, but was taken suddenly sick. He begged me to postpone my trip for a few days, but I was too eager to meet the brother whom I

had not seen for so many years. And so—very rashly, as my friends thought, but I could not bear to disappoint poor Sam—I started for Snap City."

"I traveled by train as far as I could, then took the stage line for the town brother had named in his letter. I could hardly endure the suspense as my journey neared an end, and I spent my time in picturing that meeting, little imagining just how—"

Once more her voice faltered, and as the tears came into her eyes, the poor girl bowed her head and rested her face in her trembling hands.

For some few moments all was silence save for her half-suppressed sobs, but then Sandy Sands spoke in quiet tones:

"Miss Mather reached Snap City in safety, but did not find her brother there to meet her. She went to a hotel, of course, for it was almost dark when she arrived. And as soon as she could collect her thoughts, she very naturally turned to the landlord for help. If any one in town knew Amos Duprez, he would be pretty apt to have the information."

"Unfortunately he had never heard of the gentleman, and as I happened to be near at hand, he appealed to me. I was equally as ignorant, and when I questioned him as to what was up, he told me of Miss Mather, and gave me an introduction to her. I begged to see the letter she had received, and looking at the direction, noticed the postmark, which was New Dorado."

"That gave me a clew," said May, lifting her head with a wan smile that was little less affecting than her tears. "And after waiting all that evening in hopes of brother's coming, I resolved to take the stage in the morning, and go on to this town. I started, and—that man—"

But the word refused to come, and as she recalled all that happened after the startling appearance of Tol Farrar: as she thought of Social Sam's suicide, and saw that ghastly face rising up before her eyes; the overtasked girl gave way once more, sobbing bitterly, her frame shaken like a leaf in a storm.

CHAPTER XXXII.

FENN TERRY MAKES A CONFESSION.

MRS. KING drew closer to the weeping girl, trying to soothe her grief, but with poor success. She begged May to come with her, where she could gain the repose and quiet which she so much required after all her trials, but before she could win her ends, Fenn Terry spoke up.

"Wait, mother. I too have a story to tell—a confession to make, rather—which is no more than right Miss Mather should hear."

"Is that a polite hint for us to pull out, Terry?" laughingly asked one of his friends, rising from his seat.

The mine-owner glanced quickly from face to face, his own very pale, but then he spoke, with an evident effort:

"I did not mean it as such, gentlemen, and if you care to remain, I shall be glad to have you."

"Does what you have to say relate to Captain Kidd or his doings?"

Terry shook his head in the negative, and the man spoke again:

"Then I reckon I'll be going. There's lots to do in town, and every hand helps. Of course I'll be ready whenever you make a move toward running down those evil imps. Just let me know, please."

The three citizens left the room, and Webb Tennant also rose to bear them company, at least as far as the lawn, where a few of the volunteers were still lingering. He paused in doubt as he saw Sands sitting still, but at a slight nod from the Sharp, he left the house also.

Fenn Terry saw them to the door, begging them to let the men know how Miss Mather had escaped, then he passed into his home office, unlocking the safe which had resisted the efforts of Dan Dillon and Pierre Chenault. He took from this the pocket album of which mention has been made, his face pale and troubled as he returned to the dining-room, where May had partially regained her self-control.

"I hardly know how to begin my confession, Miss Mather," he said, standing by the table, the album resting under his hand. "It is a secret which I never thought to reveal, because I dared not hope that fate would ever bring you and I together."

"What—I do not understand you, sir!" murmured May, gazing into his pale face with wondering eyes: eyes that dropped in embarrassment after meeting his glowing orbs for a few seconds.

"I hardly understand myself," with a faint smile. "I only know that it seems dishonest to keep this secret from you longer. So will you please open this little book, Miss Mather?"

He placed the album in her lap, then fell back to his former position. And as Sandy Sands closely watched him, he noted the strange trembling of that compact, muscular form.

May opened the album, but dropped it the next instant, with a low cry of amazement, not unmixed with confusion.

"Why—'tis I!" she faltered.

"Well, I do declare!" ejaculated Mrs. King, curiosity overcoming her scruples, and picking

up the book to turn the leaves rapidly. "So it is! And—look! Every picture in the book is—and I thought you never met her before yesterday, Fenn?"

"To my knowledge, he never did!" murmured May, greatly embarrassed, trying to at least in part cover her confused wonder by again taking the album and looking at the picture it contained.

In each one her face or her figure was clearly shown. In one, she was romping with a shaggy retriever. In another, she was standing beside a clump of roses, forming a bouquet. In a third she was lying in a hammock, under a shady tree, sleeping, book still in hand.

"Stolen treasures, every one of them, Miss Mather," said Terry, and there was a faint sigh in his tones as he gazed almost sadly at that flushed, downcast face. "No—you never met me before yesterday. You did not know this wide world contained such a person as Fenn Terry. But I have known for more than a year, that you lived and— Yes," cutting short the words he would have uttered. "My secret lies in your hands, Miss Mather."

"But—why—how—"

"That is what I wish to explain, if you will listen to me for a few minutes longer, Miss Mather," the mine-owner said, taking a seat where his face would be partially in the shade. "Although you may not see the connection just at first, it will make itself plain before long."

"One of my hobbies has been the study of photography, and when I went East, on business connected with my mining claims, I indulged in one of the little detective cameras, just then invented."

"My business called me to your city, and fate located me with a Mr. Davidson, who—"

"Mr. Abram Davidson?" quickly interrupted May, a flash of understanding coming into her face and eyes.

"Your next door neighbor, Miss Mather," bowed Terry, gravely. "And it was shortly after I purchased my new camera that I first noticed a young lady in the adjoining yard. I asked Davidson who she was, and then learned that he was not on speaking terms with your friend, Mr. Morrison."

"It rose from some business trouble, I believe," murmured May, her eyes still fixed on those photographs.

"If that trouble had been less serious, it would not have been my fault if you and I had not become acquainted at that time," steadily resumed Terry, plainly bent on leaving naught to be guessed at, now the ice was fairly broken. "From the very first I was strongly interested, but as I knew only Davidson in town, I could see no hopes of securing an introduction."

"I learned from my friend your name, and as much of your history as he could give, then I yielded to temptation one day, when I saw you playing with your dog; that picture is the result."

"It is very— It looks just like dear old Sport!" murmured May, her cheeks growing more rosy than ever as she bent over the album.

"At different times I secured the other pictures which you find there, and before leaving town I secured another camera, enlarging each photograph until the main figure was plainer—as you see them now."

"Well, I wound up my business, and left for home. It was not so easy. I had grown to—to take such a deep interest in my cameras. But there was important business matters calling for my attention, and I knew that it would be wisest for me to go—while I could."

There was silence for a brief space. Mrs. King was too greatly astonished to interrupt May was too much embarrassed. And Sandy Sands was wholly absorbed in studying the face of the man who he now knew was desperately in love with May Mather.

"As I said, Mr. Davidson told me your name, and a portion of your history: he only knew that you had come into a large fortune from a relative, but he told me nothing about your having a missing brother. It was too shortly after you began to advertise for him, I suppose."

"Well, I came back to New Dorado, plunging into business—to get things straightened out, for my absence had lasted longer than I had calculated. And then, a few weeks later, I first met a young man who was introduced to me as Sam Mather."

"My poor brother?" murmured May, dropping the album in her lap, forgetting all else in that one sad interest. "Tell me about him! Remember—I have not seen him since I was a wee little toddler! I can hardly make it seem true that I ever had a brother!"

"I wish I knew more, for your sake, Miss Mather," softly said the mine-owner in reply. "But from the very first I was attracted to him; though I had not the ghost of a suspicion that he was any kin to you, he bore the same name, and that made me deeply interested in his welfare."

"It was not an easy matter to win his friendship. At first he seemed to dislike, or to even regard me with suspicion. And if he had been any other name, I would have given over the effort to win his confidence as useless."

"But, as time passed on, and he came to know me better, I thought Social Sam, as nearly everybody here used to call him, was losing his first distrust, and growing to regard me as a true friend. Heaven knows I did my level best to prove my friendship!"

"I know—I believe you, Mr. Terry," murmured May, softly.

"But I know now that he could not have trusted me fully, or he would have told me something of his new-born hopes. He would have listened to me when I begged him to leave that roistering crowd and come home with me! If he had—if he only had!"

"You mean—it was just before—that night?"

"Yes. It was night before last. He was bidding the boys goodby, and then he went out to—"

"To meet a cruel death!" cried May, then bowing her head and bursting into tears as the memory of that awful sight which she had come upon in the deserted cabin came back to her. "My brother—murdered!"

"He shall be bitterly avenged, dear child!" cried Terry, winking rapidly in the effort to keep his own eyes clear. "I swear it by—"

"Suppose it is not quite so bad as you both believe?" asked Sands.

"What do you mean?" sharply demanded Terry, turning upon the Sharp.

"I once knew a Sam Mather, but he was not the man I saw at the old shack, night before last," quietly replied the handsome sport.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SANDY SANDS TAKES HIS TURN.

A MILD little sentence to produce such a commotion, and if the roof had fallen at that instant, it could hardly have drawn an eye away from that grave, yet half-smiling face.

May gave a low, choking cry, her hands clasping tightly, her eyes trying to read the whole truth in that face. The words gave her hope, though it might have puzzled her to say in just what respect; for even then she could not doubt the death of her brother.

Mrs. King looked and acted much as though she expected to behold the ghost of the suicide rising up through the floor, and Fenn Terry seemed scarcely less agitated.

Of all present, Sandy Sands alone retained any trace of composure, and even he had an appearance of having suffered his sympathies to get the upper-hand of his judgment, hurrying him into saying far more than he had intended when that interview began.

"What do you mean, Mr. Sands?" demanded Terry, after a pause which was filled with amazement and wondering doubt. "If you are trying to raise false hopes—but how can that be? We saw—"

He cut himself short, but he might have saved the trouble. May Mather did not hear him, or if so, she paid him no heed. She had eyes and ears only for the handsome stranger who had proved his goodwill and friendship.

"You know—you suspect something, Mr. Sands! Tell me—is my poor brother still—is there even a single ray of hope?"

She left her chair and dropped to her knees before the Sharp from Snap City. Her clasped hands were lifted upward, and her tear-bright eyes were watching each change in his face as though her own life depended on the verdict.

Sandy Sands gently took her hands and lifted her up, leading her back to her seat, speaking quickly, but soothingly:

"I'm afraid I said too much, Miss Mather, trying to comfort you, but if you'll try to regain your composure, I'll take my turn at confessing, though I can't promise to quite equal friend Terry, yonder."

There may have been a touch of malice in the last words, but they helped bring about the state of mind which Sandy deemed advisable, even though the color was deepened on two pair of cheeks. And drawing back to his own chair, he began his explanations.

"While I don't wish to rouse your hopes too high, Miss Mather, let me say at the send-off that I think you took a great deal for granted when you at once accepted the bare, unsupported word of a complete stranger that he was your long missing relative."

"But—the picture was recognized by—"

"B-fore, or after you named it as that of your brother?" coolly interposed the Sharp; then adding, without waiting for her answer. "But let that pass for the present, and I'll explain what I meant to convey when I hinted that possibly all hope might not yet be dead."

"I have been a sort of rolling-stone in my time, and have covered as much of our own country as any man of my age. Granting this, of course I have made many acquaintances, only to lose sight of them again. And when, some two years ago I met a young fellow of about my own age, forming his acquaintance over a good cigar and bottle of wine, I had no idea that it would pan out anything more serious than an ordinary, week-day friendship."

"It was my—his name was—" faltered May, too deeply bewildered as yet to think or speak smoothly.

"He gave me his name as Samuel Mather," was the grave response. "Of course it was

nothing more to my ears, then, than any other name would have been; but neither then, nor afterward, did I see any cause for suspecting that he had given me a title not actually his own."

"But—then who was the—the man up yonder?"

Sandy Sands frowned a bit as he gazed keenly into that swiftly changing countenance. He did not like those feverish eyes, that constantly shifting color.

"Miss Mather, I was a fool for breaking in as I did, without having a more solid excuse. I can't well mend the harm I have already worked, but unless you can control your feelings better, I can and will guard against further damage by locking my lips and going away without saying another word."

"I will be calm. You can see—is not my hand steady?" the poor girl said, forcing a smile as she held out that fair member; and Sandy Sands smiled too as he saw how distinctly it was shivering.

"I reckon you'd best postpone your story until Miss Mather has had rest, Mr. Sands," spoke up Terry; but May would not agree to that.

"It would do me more harm than good, dear friends," she said, with that forced smile which she fondly hoped would help carry the day by testifying to her complete calmness. "I must know more. I must hear all about this—this friend of yours, Mr. Sands."

"I am more than willing to tell you all I know. I simply wished to make sure your nerves were strong enough to bear up against disappointment, in case you could put no faith in the rather wild idea I had just caught on to when I uttered those unlucky words of mine."

That smile faded away, and with a sigh May sunk back into her seat. It could hardly be said that she had entertained a hope; at best it had been but the frail ghost of one; but even that had been swept away now.

"The Sam Mather I knew, and learned to love as well as it's in my nature to love one of my own awkward sex, was a rather wild specimen of humanity, given over to drinking and gambling at times, though I'm fairly confident that he had a good heart at bottom. He was simply one of those men who, turned loose with only fancy for a master, at too young an age, tried to get all the enjoyment possible out of life. And like all such young fellows, he was mighty apt to think that the louder the racket, the greater the fun."

"By this I don't mean you to think Sam wasn't an honest man. His worst enemy at that time was himself, and I knew that he'd soon outgrow all that nonsense."

"Sam had made money during the few years just before I made his acquaintance, and was then on the point of buying into a prosperous mining claim, intending to work it with his new partner, a young fellow of about his own age. And as business called me away from that point soon after, Sam was fairly settled in business when I returned."

"Of course I paid him a visit, and of course we all had to celebrate the reunion. And I was introduced to Sam's partner. And, as I hinted, I didn't like him for a cent!"

"Well, to boil it down, I saw Sam off and on, and never thought of trouble brewing until one day, when I dropped down that way from one of my business trips, I was told that the partners had sold out, and both had left the country, no one seemed to know just where."

"It looked mighty queer to me, for I reckoned Sam thought pretty near as much of me as I did of him, and surely he wouldn't have flitted like that without leaving even a word behind him!"

"I took a walk out to the claim, and could learn nothing there, save that a company had bought it, paying a large sum in hard cash. And further investigation only showed me that Sam had left by stage, in company with his recent partner."

"Something made me follow on their trail, and a week later I was listening to the first sensible words poor Sam had uttered since he was found by an honest prospector, who carried him to his cabin and did the best he could to keep life into the old fellow."

"That partner did it all, robbing Sam after having killed him, as he believed; but it wasn't to end that way. And after Sam had told his story, in whispers so faint and weak that I had to almost touch his lips with my ear, he asked me to swear that I'd take the trail and run the scoundrel down for old Sam's sake."

"Of course I promised; Sam wouldn't be able to crawl inside of good two months, if even then. By that time the trail would have grown too cold to pick up. So I promised. And just as soon as I could provide my pardner with a few comforts and a trusty nurse, I set off in quest of the knave."

"And—you found him, Mr. Sands?" hesitatingly asked Terry, his face very pale, his dark eyes watching May, rather than the one to whom he spoke.

"Not so readily as might have been," with a peculiar shrug of his shoulders. "Bad luck, not lack of will, kept me in the dark until long after Sam was able to take part in the hunt. We took different lines, to double the chances of success,

but neither of us hit a positive clew until I came to Snap City. I heard of a man who called himself Samuel Mather, living in New Dorado, and was on the point of starting out to investigate, when Miss Mather arrived. We were both looking for a man of that name, and we both found one before the trip was ended. But—it wasn't the Samuel Mather I had known in life!"

"Are you sure?" exclaimed Terry, while May sat like a statue.

"Positive. That dead man was not Samuel Mather, but Jay Christie, a robber, thief, road-agent and assassin!"

May Mather rose to her feet, both hands clasping her temples, then gave a gasping moan as she fell lifelessly in Terry's arms.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE SHARP TURNS ERRAND-BOY.

DURING the confusion which followed, Sandy Sands quietly left the house, like one who prefers evading further questioning just then, and giving Webb Tennant a sign which that astute individual had no difficulty in comprehending, he passed out of the grounds and moved off in the direction of town.

Neither man seemed anxious to talk, and few words were spoken while they took a leisurely view of the burnt district. The loss had been considerable, but luckily no lives had been lost, and only a few minor accidents had accompanied the explosions.

Nothing but a heap of smoldering embers and a mass of ashes remained to mark the spot where the hotel had stood. Under that debris must lie all that remained of Jay Christie, the false Samuel Mather, if the Sharp had made no mistake in his calculations. But neither man alluded to this, though Tennant gave a little sigh as he turned away from the ruins. No doubt he was thinking of the reward, which would be more difficult to collect now than ever.

Having found that Social Hall had suffered no harm, the curiosity of Sands seemed appeased, and he at once led the way to the stage office, in connection with which a rude sort of livery-stable was being run.

Although a stranger to the man in charge, there was no difficulty in securing a couple of fair horses, since the Sharp himself proposed paying their full value as a guarantee against injury or possible stealing. And though Webb Tennant did not seem to relish the idea of taking a ride which he knew nothing about, he raised no actual objections when Sands nodded for him to take the saddle.

As soon as they had passed out of sight of the stable, the Sharp reined down to a walk, speaking hurriedly:

"It's business, pardner, and you've hired out to me for two weeks or the war, please bear in mind!"

"All right—what am I to do?"

"Turn east, as though bound for Snap City, along the regular stage trail. Don't hurry, but wait for me at the first turn, if I don't pick you up before. I've got one little thing to fix before all's hunky!"

Though more used to taking the lead than acting as follower, Tennant raised no objection, drawing rein at the point indicated, though his wait was but a brief one. Sandy Sands came dashing up, from a point almost directly opposite that in which he might have been expected to put in an appearance.

"Kemper is safe in town, and seems unsuspecting as an unweaned babe; but, all the same, I didn't care to tell him too plainly that you and I were starting out on a tour of inspection in company, Spider," was his laughing greeting.

"Has it anything to do with the Billy-goats, Mr. Sands?"

"With the Papa Goat, Mr. Tennant," bowed the Sharp, with mock ceremony, as he took a small bottle filled with some dark preparation from his breast pocket, laughing softly as he held it up between the sky and his eyes.

"Then I'm trying to hope you were equally guarded toward Fenn Terry," added the detective, with a shrug of his stooping shoulders.

"He knows just as little of our trip as the worthy physician, and not nearly so apt to make a guess at its nature in case our absence from town should be noticed. Are you still strumming on that single string, Spider?"

"What part has that bottle to play in our trip, Mr. Sands?" asked Tennant, paying no attention to that good-natured sneer.

"Heap big medicine!" laughed the Sharp, slipping the bottle back into his breast. "Best thing in seventeen States for the colic, or obscure cases of poisoning, pardner! And as Doc didn't have just the right kind of stuff with him, he begged me to just drop this bottle off at Overflow & McKee's claim, on Policy Creek. You know we're traveling that way, and it's no extra trouble for us."

The detective frowned, checking his horse as though about to turn back from the hills into which Sands was leading, making a curve which would quickly carry them around to the side of town almost directly opposite to that in which he had started Tennant at first.

"I tell you, man, you're on the wrong scent. You're wasting both time and—"

"Whose money is it, Spider?" coolly interposed Sands. "And as for the time, I have heap more than I know what to do with, even not counting the fortnight I hired from you. So—see?"

"I wish you would take the trouble to 'see,' as you call it," still frowning, but permitting his horse to follow the lead of the other. "I can see that you are mistaken, from start to finish. Fenn Terry is the game you claim to want, and you're leaving him in full possession of the prize, while you blunder off on a false scent."

"Did Fenn Terry carry off Miss Mather last night, Spider?"

"No, but Fenn Terry's tools did. He didn't dare be out of town when that fire was kicking up such an excitement. His absence would be too sure to rouse ugly comments."

"And Doc Kemper fairly broke his back at the fire, Spider?"

"His case is different. As a doctor, and about the only one in town that can be depended upon, he might easily enough be called away at such a time."

"Exactly—he might! And that's just what we're taking this little pleasure-trip for, Spider. I want to find out, for certain whether Doctor Kemper really had an urgent call to a patient last night."

"If you find he had, will you give over your ridiculous idea that he is at the head of all this entanglement?"

"If we find that he had no such call, will you believe that you're just as big an idiot as you'd dearly love to call me, right now, only for your ideas of common politeness, Tennant?" laughed the Sharp.

There came no reply, but the detective's face wore a look of such utterly supreme disgust that Sands laughed until he almost fell from the saddle. But he quickly conquered his merriment, and said, in a more earnest tone:

"Of course it is possible that you may have hit it off right, old fellow, and that I may be barking up the wrong tree; but I feel it in my bones that Kemper is the head knave in this ugly mystery. And until his skirts are fairly cleared of sin, I'm going to act on that supposition."

"Finish it up inside of two weeks, then, or you'll have to find another hand to follow your orders, Mr. Sands," was the curt, almost angry response.

"I hope to have it all explained in much less time than you grant me, pardner," chuckled Sands, whose stock of good nature seemed inexhaustible.

"What fresh grounds have you for believing Doctor Kemper is the man?"

"He was out of town last night, from before the fire raised an alarm, until after sunrise. He found Miss Mather, though he must have been far astray from the shortest line to Policy Creek from town. And Captain Kidd was searching for Miss Mather. And Captain Kidd disappeared, just about the time Doctor Kemper came upon the scene."

"Doctor Kemper is over head and ears in love with Miss Mather, or his eyes lied most flatly while I watched them in Terry's house. If he was Captain Kidd, and was trying to win both lady and fortune, would he take so much pains to bring her back and place her under the roof of a dangerous rival, Mr. Sands?"

"That's the one weak point in my case, pardner," frankly admitted Sands, a slight frown darkening his open brows. "I read his secret, too, though I thought it was mine and his alone. Only for that, I might have put the grip on him right then and there! As it was, I thought I'd give him the benefit of a doubt, and see what might be discovered over Policy Creek ways!"

With a shrug of his shoulders, in connection with a half-sneering, half-pitying smile, Webb Tennant lapsed into silence. He was content to drop the subject, leaving the future to decide which was right and which was making an idiot of himself.

In passing near, Sandy Sands pointed out the ridge across which he had toiled in trying to gain on Captain Kidd and his captive. He also marked the rocks, on the opposite side of the arm, where May Mather must have effected her escape from the road-agent.

By keeping fairly clear of the broken region, the two men made rapid progress, and though he had never been over the ground before, the Sharp experienced but slight difficulty in striking the stream only a short distance below the claim worked by the two men whom he wished to see.

As there was no active mining done in that immediate vicinity, it was easily guessed that they had hit the right quarter when a tall, gaunt, leather-faced miner suddenly appeared before them, his eyes betraying a dull, sluggish curiosity as he jerked his head in acknowledgment of their salutation.

"We're looking for a gentleman called Todd Overflow," began Sands, taking the bottle from his bosom and casting an inquiring glance around the spot. "Dr. Kemper was unable to come himself, and as we were coming pretty

well up in this neighborhood, I offered to do the errand for him."

"What errand?" drawled the miner, staring blankly at the bottle.

"Leave this bottle of medicine for Mr. Overflow. He said it was to be taken according to the directions he left with you last night."

"Who left with me, what night?"

"Dr. Kemper—last night, of course."

"What fer?"

"The sick man—Todd Overflow."

"Who said he was sick, an' what was he sick of?"

"Didn't you ride over to town for Doctor Kemper last night, begging him to come without delay to help your pardner, Todd Overflow, who was dying from accidental poison?"

"Waal, I reckon not, stranger," with a grim chuckle as he added: "I hain't got no pardner named Overflow, nor never didn't hev, nuther."

"Then your name isn't Jim McKee?"

"Not ef I know myself, it hain't, pardner."

"Then we have evidently hit the wrong location," with a frown of annoyance. "Yet—I was told that no other firm was working a claim on Policy Creek, just at present."

"Nur they ain't that I knows on."

Sandy Sands turned a half despairing look toward Tennant, who said in a low tone:

"Ask him where we can find the man, Mr. Sands."

"Can you direct us to the house where Todd Overflow lives, sir?"

"I mought, but you wouldn't find him to him, jest now, pardner."

"Are you sure?" Kemper gave me to understand that he was a mighty sick man, and—"

"He hain't bin sick a day sence he ketched mumps, stranger," with a broad grin that told how hugely he was enjoying the situation.

"I can't understand it at all!" with a deeper frown. "Will you be so kind as to tell me where I can find Mr. Overflow, then?"

"Gi' me your paw, stranger, an' I'll p'int the critter out fer ye," the miner chuckled, stepping near enough to catch Sands's hand, which he deliberately rammed up against his own chest. "Right at the ends o' your fingers, pardner: I'm Todd Overflow!"

"But—you're a mighty sick man, and—"

"Ef anybody else says that, you tell him he lies!—I say, you Jim!"

"Yar I be, pardner!" came a husky voice, as a short, stocky fellow came into view. "What's wantin'?"

"This gent 'lows you went to town to fetch the doctor, as I was gwine dead 'long o' p'izen, Jim. How was it?"

"Durned ef I know, 'less 'twas a rig Doc putt up onto the gent."

"Wasn't Doctor David Kemper out here last night, at all?"

"Ef he was, nuther one o' us set peepers onto him, stranger."

"Then—I'll break every bone in his joking body for this trick—just as I break this bottle!" growled Sands, suiting the action to his words, then wheeling and riding swiftly away.

CHAPTER XXXV.

FOLLOWING A RED TRAIL.

MESSRS. OVERFLOW & MCKEE sent a flood of jeering laughter in chase of the horsemen, but neither Sandy Sands nor Webb Tennant paused or looked back to acknowledge the contribution. To all appearance they had thoughts only as to how they could get out of the Policy Creek region with the least waste of time.

"Good as a show while it lasted, wasn't it, Spider?" chuckled the Sharp, drawing rein at last, when far beyond all risk of discovery by the miners.

"I've seen better, if you are fishing for a compliment, Mr. Sands, but Overflow played his part to perfection. I could hardly help giving him a hand."

"What's your private opinion of Doctor Kemper, as a doctor, about this time o' day, Spider?" gravely asked Sands, though there was a malicious twinkle to be detected in his keen gray eyes as he awaited a reply.

"I see no cause to alter the opinion I gave you just after leaving town, Mr. Sands. If the question related to yourself, I might put it a little plainer; that's all."

"Well, of all stubborn—confound it all, man! You can't have the cheek to hold up for that rascal, even now?"

"Why not? In what respect is David Kemper worse now than he was yesterday, last week, a month or a year ago?"

"He isn't; and that's just what's the matter with our masculine Hannah! Not a whit worse; simply a little worse off for being found out."

"You have made an important discovery, then, Mr. Sands?"

That gentleman abruptly reined his horse directly in front of the animal ridden by the detective, and for the first time since their acquaintance began, the cool, steady-nerved Sharp from Snap City showed positive symptoms of anger.

"Joking is all right, in the proper time and place, but—"

"Do I look as though I was jesting, my dear sir?"

To do him justice, he did not. His face was fairly owl-like in its gravity, without even the suspicion of a smile.

"But you can't still hold out that Kemper is innocent, after what we drew out of those two fellows back yonder?"

"You reminded me once that every shield has two sides, Mr. Sands," placidly uttered the detective, as the Sharp permitted their horses to resume the trail at a leisurely pace. "Possibly the side turned in my direction has a few marks on it which your eagle eye has failed to make a note of. In other words, how do you *know* that Doctor Kemper was *not* called out of town to attend Todd Overflow, last night?"

"Well, of all contrary coots!" ejaculated Sands, in pure disgust; but Webb Tennant merely smiled, then added:

"That there's a lie out somewhere, I'm free to admit; but that the sin lies entirely at Kemper's door, is not so easily proven. In the first place, what made him give the names of his patient and the man by whom he was summoned in such haste?"

"Because I asked him, and in such a manner that he could not decline to tell, without showing too clearly that he had good reasons for keeping the secret."

"Weak, very weak, Mr. Sands!" nodded Tennant. "If Kemper was really the knavish schemer you are trying to make out, would he make such a clumsy slip as that? Would he not have his proofs all perfected in advance? Most assuredly! And the fact that the men whose names he *did* give, now bear witness against him, is proof positive in my mind that he actually made the call as he told us."

"You talk just as though you believed it all!" grimly laughed the Sharp, though there was a touch of artificial mirth in the notes. "Maybe you could even bring some weighty proof against Fenn Terry!"

"I'll not go quite so far as to call it *proof*, but—what's the matter with Terry sending out a runner to buy off those two rascals? We lost plenty of time before starting, in town, and he *could* have done all that, easy enough."

Sandy Sands stared for full half a minute into that gaunt visage, his own face fairly filled with amazement that such blind, insane prejudice could find birth in the brain of one not an actual candidate for the insane asylum; forgetting, possibly, that Tennant might be entertaining views almost as strong against his own judgment. But then, with a wave of his hand and a light, careless laugh, he cried out cheerily:

"Flag o' truce, pardner! It's the irresistible coming into contact with the immovable, all over again. Drop it all—and I'll lick the fellow who brings it up again before your hero or mine is fairly convicted of being the original Jacobs."

"I'm willing, if you are," nodded Tennant, but with a smile playing about his thin lips that spoke far more plainly; he knew that he had had the best of the argument.

As they rode briskly on in the general direction of town, Sandy Sands kept a close lookout toward the hills, and when nearly opposite the point where he had been forced to admit he had lost all clew to Captain Kidd, he spoke out:

"I reckon we'll take a look at matters over yonder, Spider. We'll have plenty of daylight to serve, and I'm hungry to find out just how Captain Kidd managed to get that carrion out of sight in such a hurry."

"You are sure it was carrion?"

"A man's a fool to think he's sure of anything in this world, as you tried—but that's tabooed!" clapping a palm over his lips as he cast a roguish glance into that grave, saturnine countenance, unbroken by a smile. "I was pretty sure of that much, though. I know I drilled the rascal. I know he felt like a dead man. I know he left blood enough behind him to supply two ordinary sets of arteries. But—I know he was gone when I came back to that spot!"

"Did you hunt closely for a trail? May he not have revived sufficiently to drag himself to some cover, close by?"

"That's just the doubt that takes me into the rocks, Spider. From this time on, I'm not going to take anything for granted, nor leave aught to chance."

Before the afternoon was half spent, the two men were riding rapidly along one arm of the "Y"-shaped valley, both eager to reach the junction and attempt to solve the mystery.

"Light and hitch, pardner," nodded the Sharp, suiting the action to his words, leaving his horse to nip the twigs from the covert in which Dan Dillon had lain in wait the night before. "I can see the spot of wasted ruby from here!"

A few moments later they were eagerly moving over the rocky level, searching for the drops of blood which Sandy Sands was the first to detect, leading away from that spot. And little by little the mystery was unfolded to them.

Captain Kidd had taken no part in that removal, and it may be doubted whether he gave his satellite even a second thought after knowing that he must have bungled his mission, since the given rendezvous was not kept.

Dan Dillon had partially rallied from the shock of his wound, and with the dog-like in-

stinct which is inborn, he painfully dragged himself away to cover, to die unseen, unhurt, undisturbed by friend or foe. For it was scarcely probable that he could have hoped for recovery.

The red trail grew plainer as the level was passed, and the exertion of climbing among the rocks caused the wound to bleed anew, disturbing the clotted blood which had closed the bullet-holes. And then, lying curled up in a little cavity, Sandy Sands discovered his game!

"Dead enough, I'm fearing, Spider," he said, with a touch of disappointment in his voice. "I hoped to catch him living, if only to show you which one was right, you or—steady, old man!"

But Webb Tennant sprang past the Sharp, catching the weapon which Dan Dillon, roused from his half-stupor, half-sleep by the sound of human voices, had tried to bring to bear on Sands, whose face was turned toward his comrade just then. The pistol exploded, but the bullet went harmlessly humming through space.

"Lively enough for a corpse, Mr. Sands," grimly laughed Tennant, his long fingers swiftly searching the wounded gambler, removing his only other weapon: the knife with which he had expected to remove the head of his victim, as proof that he had accomplished the task set him.

"Don't—I'm shot all to pieces!" huskily moaned the miserable wretch as he recognized those two faces. "Don't butcher—die in peace!"

"Die nothing!" laughed Sands, rising from a hasty examination of the wound. "I shot too high to make a kill of it, and if you could only live long enough, dollars to cents you'd get well! But what's the use? The gang's all broken up, and Doc Kemper stands ready to swear every one of your individual necks into a noose! If we patched you up, it would only be to turn you over to die by *his* evidence."

"Give him the first rope, then—curse him from tip to toe!"

"Why should we curse him, Dillon, when he's acting on our side?"

"It's a lie! he's fooling you, just as he's selling us! Kemper is the head of the gang—Captain Kidd—no less!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

SPRINGING THE SNARE.

THAT savage outburst served to exhaust the wounded rascal, and though he was exultant over having extorted this important confession, Sandy Sands joined with Webb Tennant in doing all that lay in their power to save that remnant of life. Hardly through motives of mercy, though neither of the twain were without humanity; but because many more points of hardly less value might be obtained from his lips.

A little good liquor served to restore Dillon to consciousness, and after Sands brought fresh water from the spring upon one arm of the valley, and a little food which remained from their lunch, was cautiously administered to the wounded man, he began to pick up wonderfully.

Sandy resisted the temptation to crow over Tennant, and neither tried to extract any further information from Dillon before he recovered a goodly quantity of strength. Then after they assured him that he should receive as good treatment as possible, and that if he lived to come to trial they would speak as good a word for him as they conscientiously could, he deliberately repeated his assertion that Dr. David Kemper was the head and prime spirit in the road-agent band known as Captain Kidd's Billy-goats.

Even Tennant seemed half-convinced of this, and he worked briskly in company with Sands, forming a horse-litter on which Dillon might be transported to town, without serious danger of dying by the way, now his wound had been carefully dressed.

But few words passed between the two comrades, each seeming content to await a more favorable opportunity for discussing the matter, and though they had nothing more effective than their knives to work with, it still lacked considerably of sunset when their task was completed, so far as shaping the litter was concerned.

Having no blankets, the two men sacrificed their coats to form the hollow bed in which Dillon must lie. And when the poles, one on each side, were strapped to the saddle of the steadiest horse, the other ends dragging on the ground, with the litter itself at a fairly safe distance from the horse's heels, all was ready for the start.

Then the men who were working to bring the whole truth to light, gazed steadily into one another's face, knowing that the next most important point must now be settled.

"Where shall we take him, Spider?" asked Sandy Sands.

"It's for you to say," with the old shrug of his shoulders. "And of course that means to Terry's house."

"You don't kick?"

"Why should I? You're on top. I might as well own up, I reckon!"

Their hands met in a warm grasp, and Dillon was carefully deposited in the litter, and the slow, cautious journey was begun.

By making frequent halts, and judiciously ad-

ministering brandy by small sips, Dillon was carried to Terry's house without seriously exhausting him. And when the fellow was safely deposited on Terry's own bed, the three men entered into an earnest consultation.

The mine-owner seemed even harder to convince than the detective had been, and long refused to believe that David Kemper was the cold-blooded villain Dan Dillon tried to make out.

"It's pure spite work!" he doggedly declared, shaking his head as though declining to hear further argument. "You started off on the wrong foot when you told the knave that Kemper was ready to bear witness against them all!"

But after they had paid the sick chamber a visit in company, and Terry questioned the wounded gambler keenly, he was forced to admit that appearances were all against the doctor.

"You acted as though you suspected him yourself, when we were all together at the cabin where Social Sam was found," quietly observed Tennant.

"Because I thought he was taking particular pains to paint the case too blackly against the man whom I had called my friend," was the response. "I never set down worse than dogged prejudice against Kemper."

"Well, we all know that there is such a rascal as Captain Kidd," said Sands. "And we know, too, that Miss Mather will not be safe until the gang is broken up and its head punished. If Kemper is innocent, he surely can clear himself. If guilty—and I'm free to confess that I have all along believed him Captain Kidd—he must pay the penalty."

After a little more argument and discussion, it was decided to send for Dr. Kemper, simply stating that a patient required his immediate services at the Terry mansion. If he mistook the sex of that patient until beyond those portals, so much the better, since his capture had been fully decided upon.

It seemed like a stroke of good fortune that brought a neighbor to the door, just then; who called to inquire how Miss Mather was faring after her rough experience; and as the gentleman was going back to town at once, Terry begged him to call on Dr. Kemper and ask him to come to the house with as little delay as possible.

"It makes me feel like a miserable cur," he muttered, with a frown, as he watched the neighbor rapidly retracing his steps. "Though I didn't say so in plain words, he took it that I meant Miss Mather was ill."

"All the better, for that belief will bring Doc over in a hurry," laughed the Sharp, but apparently without noting the quick flush which came into Terry's face as he read the riddle aright.

Maybe it was this innocent shaft which lent Terry the courage to play his part so well when Dr. Kemper appeared in view, walking rapidly and seeming very much in earnest as he sprang up the veranda steps; for flinging wide the front door, the mine-owner hurriedly said, without giving the unsuspecting medico a chance to put a question:

"Follow me, doctor! There's no time to lose, I'm afraid!"

He ran up the stairs, and Kemper took them three at a stride, and was fairly inside the chamber where he expected to discover Miss Mather lying in sore need of his services, before he detected his error.

He stopped short as he caught sight of a masculine figure lying on the bed, and his dark face grew very pale as he flashed a swift, comprehensive glance around the room, his eyes resting only for a moment on each of the three to be seen, besides the man lying on the bed.

Sandy Sands was blandly beaming upon him. Webb Tennant looked more saturnine than usual. Fenn Terry had closed the door behind them, and was now leaning with his back against it, his hands behind his back and a half-ashamed, half-angry expression upon his pale face.

"I was told that my services were required by Miss Mather," the doctor said. "Will you please explain?"

"There's the explanation, doctor," Sands explained, with a wave of a hand toward the bed, where Dan Dillon feebly turned his head so that his baggy face became visible. "Please do the best you can for the poor devil. I'll stand shot, of course, since I shot him."

"Save me, Doc," huskily muttered the wounded knave, forgetting all else in his clinging to life. "I'm shot all to pieces, but you can patch me up if any living soul can!"

"You see, Doctor Kemper," began the Sharp, only to be instantly silenced by the physician, who moved toward the bedside.

"Duty comes first. Don't bother, or come near unless I should require your aid. After my work is done—time enough to ask for and receive explanations, then!"

Of one thing there could be no possible doubt. Dr. Kemper must have seen that he had been lured into some sort of a trap, even granting that he was not Captain Kidd, as well as free from all other guilt; yet he set about his work with hands as steady as fate, or as his own stern countenance.

Each one of the trio watching his deliberate yet time-saving movements, secretly admitted that they never witnessed a more superb exhibition of pure nerve.

As the Sharp's lead had passed entirely through the body of the gambler, this first dressing of the double wound could be performed without the aid of instruments, which, of course, Kemper had not thought of bringing with him. It was possible that bits of clothing might have been left inside the channel after the lead had carried them part way, but that was an after-care, and did not protract the dressing of the hurt.

"Now, Mr. Terry," said the doctor, turning from his patient to face those whom he must have instinctively recognized as his enemies. "You are holding something in reserve. Will you speak out, like a man?"

Terry motioned toward Sands, and the Sharp bluntly enough made known the charges which they were ready to bring against him, calling on Dan Dillon to repeat his accusations in full.

Kemper listened in silence while this was being done, then he took out his watch, opening its case and noting the exact instant, saying:

"I suspected another trap, after last night's work, and I heard it snap behind me as I entered this chamber. Now, Daniel Dillon, confess who hired you to tell this abominable lie, or die the death of a dog!"

"What do you mean? It's gospel truth I'm—"

"I've poisoned your wound, and I alone know the antidote!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

WHO IS CAPTAIN KIDD?

JOHN KEENAN was attending strictly to business, on this, the second evening after the fire in which a fair portion of New Dorado vanished amidst the flames.

That fire had been disastrous to many, but among them was not the handsome owner of Social Hall. The only saloon in town which could even pretend to rivalry had been destroyed by fire, and ever since the white and yellow "mint drops" had been fairly rolling across the bar and falling into Keenan's till.

His two assistants showed signs of "wear and tear," but Keenan himself was fresh and neat and cool as a daisy just out of the dew, though his skill as a "tumbler-juggler" enabled him to do as much work as both of his barkeepers combined, without showing the effects one-half as plainly.

Yet it might have been observed that he never moved far from an ornamental cluster of grasses which helped to decorate the bar, and out from the heart of this now came a low, peculiar tapping sound.

"What's up?" spoke Keenan into the hidden mouthpiece of a slender tube, the other end of which came close to the head of the cot on which Tol Farrar was lying, up-stairs.

"You're wanted. Dan's here, bad hurt, an' says he must see you—it's life or death, he says, an'—"

John Keenan stopped to hear no more, but rammed a plug into the mouth of the speaking-tube, then, without stopping to take off his white apron, or to say a word to his customers or assistants, he hastened from behind the bar and out of Social Hall, passing around to gain an entrance at the rear door.

He could have saved a few seconds in time by taking the passage which opened from the gambling hall, but as he was uncertain just what measures he should take to silence, satisfy, or "remove" Dan Dillon, he preferred leaving as blind a trail as possible behind him.

With a curse on his lips and even worse in his heart, John Keenan flung open the narrow door that gave admittance to his sleeping apartment, from whence Tol Farrar's voice had telephoned him such unwelcome news; but before he could fairly cross the threshold, a heavy smothering bag or blanket swooped down over his head: strong arms grappled with him, pinning both arms helplessly; other hands snatched his feet from under him, and then a mountain seemed to settle down over his person as he was deposited flat on his back.

"Got his trotters snug, pardner?" whispered Sandy Sands, and Fenn Terry promptly nodded assent; for where every thing is carefully planned, and all possible needs anticipated, few hands can make swift and certain work.

"Grab a root, then, and we'll snatch the gentleman down-stairs in a holy hurry. He can wait for the second table," with a nod that followed the direction of Terry's eyes, to the bed on which Tol Farrar was lying, his eyes widely open, his face ghastly pale with fright, but his limbs bound and his jaws securely gagged.

As for Dan Dillon, nothing of that rascal was visible, and this fact, taken into connection with the unhappy predicament in which Tol Farrar found himself, hinted loudly at the manner of trap into which the proprietor of Social Hall had fallen.

When outside the building, John Keenan was placed upon his feet, and the bonds were taken from his legs. He was bidden to walk, but he bluntly declined so doing, and rather than waste precious time in idle disputations, the two strong

men picked him up again and hurried away to Fenn Terry's house.

A second trip to the rear of Social Hall was made, this time taking a couple of bearers along to stand the brunt, one of whom was Webb Tennant, recently returned from a long ride on business, the other being almost his counterpart, so far as build and figure were concerned.

With their aid Tol Farrar was quickly transported to the Terry mansion, where a sufficient number of guests were now gathered to justify the opening of the ball.

A number of chairs were ranged along the wall, in the chamber where Dan Dillon lay, his face pale, his cheeks sunken, his eyes hollow and yet feverishly bright. In each chair a prisoner was sitting, with the Sharp from Snap City and Webb Tennant standing guard over them.

Near the middle sat Dr. Kemper and John Keenan, each with hands hidden behind his back and stout thongs about his ankles. Flanking them were others, less prominent in this chronicle, but all undoubted "Billy-goats." Among them were Darby and Simpkins, whom Captain Kidd detailed to use the chloroform and kindle the fires at the Mansion House; Dick Wendling, one of the three "famous hunters" who "discovered" the "suicide" of Social Sam; Tol Farrar, who had improved wonderfully under the skill of Dr. Kemper and the care of John Keenan, with one or two others whose names have not been used up to date.

"Now, Daniel," remarked the Sharp from Snap City, in his most cheerful notes, "if you'll just tune up your bazoo, we'll try to hear you out without dropping off into the Land of Nod."

"Where shall I begin?" hesitated the wounded informer, with a dogged yet nervous glance over that row of bound figures.

"What do you know about the death of Social Sam? Did he really take his own life, or was it taken for him?"

"He did not kill himself!" was the distinct response.

"Do you mean to say that he was murdered?"

"That is the way you'd look at it. We called it punished," with a sickly smile briefly lighting up his face.

"Who administered that punishment?"

"Captain Kidd."

There was a brief silence, through which scarcely a person present drew breath. Nearly every pair of eyes were turned toward the center of that line, but neither Kemper nor Keenan changed a muscle. If anything, they seemed less interested in the matter than any of their companions in trouble.

Sandy Sands clearly enjoyed the situation, flashing a roguish glance toward Webb Tennant, who stood like some grim, dyspeptic statue.

"Do you know just why Captain Kidd killed Social Sam? If so you may tell us all about it. Don't wait for questions, unless I take a notion you are skipping some point of importance."

There is no need to follow Dan Dillon through his story, part confession, part accusation, for all that has been recorded in these pages. Enough that he tried to conceal nothing. Knowing that his neck, if not his freedom, depended on the perfect truth of his story, he left naught to be guessed at, nothing to be extorted by questioning.

Not a word came to interrupt his narrative, and only when the tragedy of Social Sam was fully explained, did the Sharp from Snap City speak again.

"Now, Daniel, one good turn deserves another. Tell us all you know about the fire of two nights ago. Who started it?"

"Flock Darby and Joe Simpkins," was the prompt response, lifting a hand and pointing out those two rascals: a hardly necessary action, for their own faces were convicting them both.

"They were the tools, but whose brain hatched up the plot, and whose authority set them into motion?"

"Captain Kidd!"

"Can you say what his objects were?"

"First, to get rid of you two gentlemen. He knew Mr. Tennant was a detective, and he believed you were another. Darby and Simpkins were to squirt chloroform into your rooms, then start the fire, letting you both burn to death while drugged."

"Dear, kind, thoughtful Captain Kidd!" laughed the Sharp from Snap City. "Pure humanity, of course! He couldn't bear to think of even such atrocious wretches suffering! But go on, Daniel; you said firstly?"

"Yee. His second object was to raise such a row that Fenn Terry would be drawn away from home long enough to let us carry off the young lady who was to come into such a big boodle."

"Then Fenn Terry was not Captain Kidd, or even allied with the family of Billy-goats?" asked Sands, in mock surprise.

"No, sir. So far as I know to the contrary, he's square as a die."

Sandy Sands flashed a humorous glance toward Webb Tennant, but not even the ghost of a smile answered him back. And he spoke again:

"Now, Daniel, up to this moment you have not plucked the hairy mask from the classic

brows of your noble Captain Kidd. Will you look over this line of noble gentlemen, and say if you can recognize the captain?"

Dillon obeyed, though all knew his answer was ready without that.

"I see the man who has always acted as Captain Kidd, sir."

"Point him out, and give his every-day name, please!"

"There he is—JOHN KEENAN!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE LAST CARD PLAYED.

THERE seemed to be magic in his words, for Dr. David Kemper rose to his feet, the thongs dropping from about his limbs without an effort on his part to burst them asunder.

"Good boy, Doc!" cried Sandy, catching the doctor by both hands and shaking them as though he had taken a contract to disarm the entire community and meant to begin with the physician. "If I don't get drunk at your wedding, it's because you never give me a chance to try."

"Dollars to cents he's the man!" drawled Webb Tennant, in tones so exactly like those of the Sharp, that even Sands gave a little start.

"Both of us mutton-heads, eh, Spider?" laughed the sport, knowing that it was now his turn to take a sly rub or two.

"Only fit to tote medicine to—can you direct me to a gentleman named Todd Overflow?" mimicked the gaunt detective.

"Bet I jest kin, stranger!" mimicked Sands; then, turning to where the gaunt, leathery-visaged counterpart of the detective was sitting, he spoke briskly: "Who put you up to the part you played off on Doc and us two innocents, Todd Overflow?"

"Cap'n Kidd," was the subdued response.

"We was part o' the gang, an' hed to knuckle when he said squat! An' so—waal, he fixed it the way you reckoned. Jim was to go in a monstrous hurry fer Doc. I was nigh gone 'long o' gittin' some p'izen truck into me unbeknownst. An' then, when the time come, we was to swar up hill an' down hill that we hedn't sent nure went fur Doc, nure that he didn't never come to them parts any time a-tall to our sartin' knowin'. An' so—waal, we jest reckoned we was stuffin' ye two critters clean up to the nines!"

This confession removed the last suspicion from the honor of Dr. Kemper, and after Todd Overflow and Jim McKee had fully confirmed the oath of Dan Dillon as to the identity of Captain Kidd, they were removed from the chamber. And as each one of the minor rascals in turn declared that John Keenan was the head of the gang, they also were removed to other quarters, for safe-keeping until wanted again.

When all others had been taken outside, save Dillon and Keenan, the jaws of the saloon-keeper were set free, and he was questioned as to what he could offer in his defense.

"Not a word—to such curs!" was his defiant response. "If you dare bring me before the proper authority, I'll make my answer there. Until then, all I say is, do your worst! I'm not Captain Kidd. Prove the contrary if you can!"

"Which is exactly what we propose doing," assured the Sharp from Snap City. "Your little bonfire gave Spider-web a bit of a set-back in the matter of a neat reward which he hoped to collect for proving Social Sam cold meat; maybe he can play even by twisting a rope about your neck for murdering that same Jay Christie."

Less than one hour later, a few close friends were gathered in another room under the Terry roof.

May Mather was resting in an easy-chair, still showing the effects of her recent trials, but with bright eyes and a faint tinge of color coming and going in her fair cheeks.

She knew that something of importance remained as yet untold, and though a wild suspicion of that glad truth had occurred to her more than once, since the Sharp from Snap City had bidden her hope on, not yet could she venture to fully believe.

Mrs. King sat near her, ready to lend aid in case of need.

Dr. Kemper was standing near a window, his strong face wearing an unconscious look of melancholy; for, though he had come out of the fiery furnace without smirch or stain on his garments, he cared little for that; he had lost all hopes of what was to him far more precious.

He knew, as did the other, that but for his cool wit and iron nerves, matters must have gone badly with him, since not only Dan Dillon, but every other member of that evil gang, was solemnly sworn to cast suspicion on his shoulders, that the genuine Captain Kidd might remain at liberty to work for their release or escape. But by making the rascally knave believe his wounds were poisoned, and that he alone held the secret of cure, the whole truth came out at last.

Fenn Terry, Webb Tennant, and Sandy Sands were the others present, and the Sharp from Snap City, gently taking May's hand, confessed the brief imposition he had been guilty of.

For he was the real Samuel Mather, her brother and co-heir!

"I can't even yet understand how I kept from betraying myself when the landlord introduced us, sister," he added, when the maiden had in a measure regained her composure after thus finding a living brother for one dead and cremated. "Up to that moment I never dreamed of your being in this part of the country."

"Why did you not tell me, brother?" reproachfully murmured May, her white hand trembling visibly as it stroked his curls, for now he was sitting at her feet, looking up into her sweet face. "Why did you let me treat you as a stranger? Why did you—when I found—"

"Steady, little woman!" cried the Sharp, as the girl gave tokens of breaking down once more. "Turn on the water-works, and out the window I go, if I break my blessed neck in stopping!"

"Well, I'll try my best, but—"

"Stop at best, sister, and let me explain just a bit further before you frighten me some more," laughed the Sharp. "First, I was hunting for the fellow who, as Jay Christie, Spider-web wanted so badly. I knew him as Morgan Wycherly, when he and I ran a mining claim in partnership. Yes," with a laughing nod as May gave a little start: "I was the friend I told you about, of course, since he was Sam Mather, and Sam Mather was your brother, and I was Sam Mather, and—but perhaps that's plain enough for the present?"

He had gained his purpose, since May was laughing at his dexterous playing on his own name, and then he rapidly cleared away the mists which had confused her.

"Of course I knew you were being foully tricked, little one, but I felt fully able to protect you from all harm, particularly since you had unwittingly given me a complete insight into the plot. And never dreaming—as how should I—that we were to meet the false Sam Mather before reaching New Dorado, I thought it surest to nip him in the very act; for I never for a moment doubted that he was Wycherly, after seeing the picture you showed me. I knew it by that triangular scar, let alone the face itself."

"Why he took my name, I can't say, for when he robbed and left me for dead, he could not possibly have known of that fortune. Still, I had been very frank with him, telling him all about my relatives, and my long absence. So, maybe, he really thought of taking my name and identity, perhaps wandering back to the old home on the chance of picking up something worth the trouble. But, this is only a guess, mind you."

There were many more words spoken, and the night was well spent before that company shook hands and separated; but with the main points given, the rest can readily be supplied by the imagination.

John Keenan was brought to trial and found guilty of murdering Jay Christie. He was sentenced to death, and suffered that dread penalty. But he died with locked lips, and no man ever heard him admit that he was the once notorious Captain Kidd.

Dan Dillon turned state's evidence, and was let go free as reward. But it benefited him little, since he was shot and killed in a saloon row, within the year.

Tol Farrar also recovered, and bids fair to serve out his term. If so, his head will be pretty frosty when the sun of liberty once more shines upon it!

Still, he is not so lonely as might have been expected, for he has a number of old friends serving within the same grim walls, and if they can't talk over old times, when they were "Billy-goats" together, they can at least catch occasional glimpses of a familiar face.

Darby and Simpkins are also "serving the State," for arson.

Dr. Kemper disappeared from New Dorado, and none of our friends can say just where he may be at the present writing. A generous gift came to bride and bridegroom when May Mather became Mrs. Fenn Terry, but there was no name attached to it. Still, May knew that the doctor sent it.

"Let alone a woman's reading a man's every secret!" laughed Sam Mather—the genuine Sam—when he heard her telling Fenn her belief. "Especially when that man is dead in love with that woman!"

Webb Tennant really collected his reward, for the death of Jay Christie was amply proven: so he was happy, also!

THE END.

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